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*Past the End of the Pavement*

*Books by*

CHARLES G. FINNEY

THE CIRCUS OF DR. LAO

THE UNHOLY CITY

*Past the End  
of the Pavement*



CHARLES G. FINNEY

*New York*  
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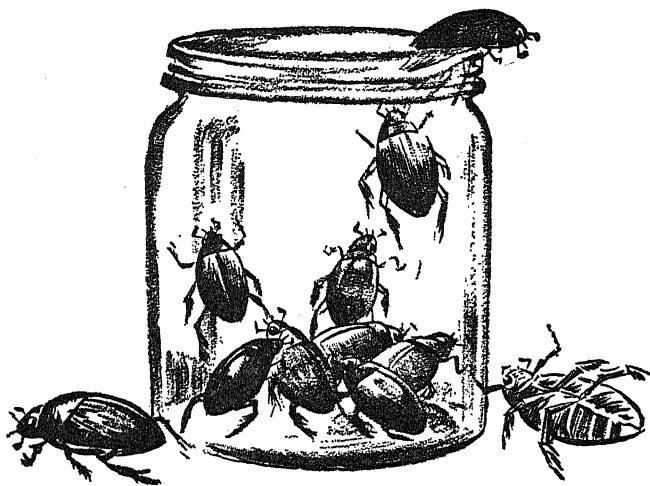
PRINTED IN THE  
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*To*

MARIE FINNEY







## *Chapter One*

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IT WAS THE SIGHT OF her two boys careening from the alley into her back yard that brought Mrs. Helen Farrier up short. She experienced a sudden sinking of the heart. For the first time she was aware that up to now it had been a pleasant day, cool and calm and placid. There weren't many such days in the normal run of Mrs. Farrier's experience with her two sons, Willie and Tom. Willie was ten, now, and Tom eight, and what Mrs. Farrier often had

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occasion to think was that they needed the presence, if not the restraint, of their deceased father. Two boys, she reflected, were more than enough for a single widow who couldn't even afford the luxury of a hired girl.

Right after the rain that morning, she remembered, the boys had gone out of the house. They had caught some water bugs which seemed, inexplicably, to fascinate them, and when she had gone downtown she had left them still enthralled with their catch. She had gone with a light heart; the voice of experience was still, or at least subdued enough for her to dismiss all fear of mischief. And when she had got home from shopping, around five o'clock of a midsummer afternoon, the yard had still been quiet. The boys were nowhere about. The house, too, was quiet as she walked through it to the kitchen, laid down her packages, and put on her apron. Probably the boys were still off somewhere, amusing themselves with their bugs. She opened a brown bag, extracted half a dozen small potatoes, and ran cold water over them. . . .

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She was peeling the first potato when, through the kitchen window, she saw them: Willie first and Tom at his heels. Without slackening their pace they scampered out of her sight toward the front, but in spite of their speed she gained a graphic impression of worried faces, unbelievably muddy garments, and general dishevelment and disarray. And on their heels a man came stalking, his face registering an expression of anger, disgust and displeasure. She had to look at him twice before she recognized him as Mr. Wilson, the pharmacist who lived across the alley from her.

Mrs. Farrier was never a person to jump to conclusions, but the conclusion now was inescapable: something had happened which involved her boys and Mr. Wilson, and she knew that whatever it was, it was unpleasant. She wiped her hands and went to the door.

"Why, Mister Wilson!" she said. "Whatever has happened?"

"Plenty!" said Mr. Wilson. "Where'd them kids of yours get to?"

"Oh! Did Tom and Willie do something?"

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"You come along with me, Miz Farrier; I'll show you what they done."

"Oh, dear!" she said. And she followed him across the alley into his back yard.

"See them tomater vines all tore up? Yer kids did that. See all this here water running all over the place and piling up my bill? Yer kids did that. But that ain't nothing. Look at my house, Miz Farrier. And I just had her fresh painted, too!"

The pretty little white house of the Wilsons was pretty no longer. It was freckled and spotted and streaked with mud. It looked as if a giant had sprayed it with a spraygun loaded with mud.

"Yer kids done that, too," said Mr. Wilson sadly. "And I just had it fresh painted."

"But I don't understand!" said Mrs. Farrier. "It's just awful! Why did they do such a thing?"

"Well, they had 'em a row with my daughter Mae and her cousin Elmira what's here from Ioway to visit. What do you aim to do about it, Miz Farrier?"

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"Why . . . why . . . I don't know, Mister Wilson. What should I do?"

"Well, looks like yuh might at least offer to get it cleaned up fer me."

"Why . . . well, should I send Willie and Tom back and make them wash it?"

"What? No, sir! Not ever! Them kids can't never set foot in this yard again! I won't have it."

Mrs. Farrier was on the edge of tears. "Perhaps," she said, "I can get a man to do it. W-would it cost very much?"

Mr. Wilson looked at her and suddenly felt a little ashamed of himself. He knew how poor she was and what a struggle it had been for her since her husband died.

"Oh, heck," he mumbled, "I'm sorry fer scolding yuh like I been, Miz Farrier, but, doggonit, I lose my temper and then I lose my head. 'Tain't your fault if yer kids get out of hand, I guess. Never mind the house; I'll wash her myself. But, gosh, don't let's have nothing like this happen ever again, please!"

"Heavens, I hope not!" said Mrs. Farrier.

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"I'm going right home and talk to my boys, Mister Wilson. I promise you it won't happen again."

She closed her kitchen door and went to the front of the house. She looked in her sons' room; there Willie and Tom were, standing in the middle of the floor. Uncertainty and apprehension twisted their faces; mud clung and stuck all over them.

"Well?" said Mrs. Farrier.

"What did Mister Wilson say, mamma?" asked Willie in a nervous voice.

"Oh, did you know Mister Wilson was here?"

"Uh huh."

"How?"

"Well . . . he come chasing after us, mamma."

"Why?"

"I dunno."

"Now, Willie!"

"Well . . . I guess it was 'cause little Mac

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Wilson and that other girl got some mud on 'em or something."

"Did the house get some mud on it, too?"

"Well . . . a little, kinda."

"But what did little Mae and her cousin have to do with it?"

"By golly, they had ever'thing to do with it, mamma! They went and started the whole thing! It was all their fault, mamma. Wasn't it, Tom?"

"It sure was," said Tom. "Them doggone old girls oughta be kilt!"

Mrs. Farrier sat down on her sons' bed. "I suppose you better begin at the beginning and tell me all about it," she said.

"Well, mamma, you 'member those water beetles we caught this morning?"

She remembered. . . .

There had been a terrific cloudburst just at dawn. And, when Tom and Willie had finished their breakfast, though the rain had stopped, the water still remained, in puddles and pools and even small lakes in the streets where the

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raindrops had been impounded in the overloaded gutters.

So the delighted boys had begun to wade. They ran and splashed in the water. They made hasty boats from wooden blocks and tin cans and sailed them in the wide, shallow pools. And then Tom discovered the beetles.

He saw something sleek and shiny black—shinier even than new black patent leather—zigzagging through the roiled water with high speed and amazing virtuosity. It seemed to have no head or tail and no visible means of propulsion. It was shaped in the manner of a tatting needle: fat in the middle, pointed symmetrically at either end. Its speedy, purposeless courings, now seen, now hidden in the water, fascinated him. He called in much excitement to his brother.

“Hey, Willie! C’mere! C’mere quick!”

Willie, launching a tin boat, asked, “What-cha got?”

“I dunno. I think it’s a fish. I never seen anything like it. C’mere quick!”

So Willie came. He took one look at the



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black zigzagger and became even more excited  
than Tom.

"Well, my gosh! Here, we'll catch it! Wade in there and head it off! Grab it, guy! Grab it! Grab it when it comes atcha like that!"

"Maybe it'll bite," said Tom doubtfully. "Do you think it's a fish?"

"I dunno what it is; that's why we gotta catch it. G'wan now, grab it when I head it over to yuh. Doggonit, you're not scared, are yuh?"

Tom, with his bravery thus at stake, made a wild grab and caught the black swimmer as it attempted to reverse itself in midwater. Immediately on making the catch he felt his palm nipped and the insides of his fingers scratched; he yelled, "Oh, gosh, it bit me!" and he flung the thing out in the middle of the street.

Willie paid no attention to his brother's outcry. Instead, he raced to effect a recapture. The quarry was vibrating awkwardly on the dry brick pavement, inept and uncertain after its vivacity in the water.

"Aw, it ain't nothing but a durned old bug,"

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said Willie in deep disappointment. "I thought  
sure it was a fish or something."

"It bit me," said Tom. "Step on the doggone  
thing."

"No," said Willie. "I want to see how it can  
swim so good. Get a little stick and turn it over  
on its back."

"You turn it over. I got bit once."

"Aw, Tom, it can't hurt yuh if yuh use a  
stick! My gosh!" And Willie kicked at it care-  
fully with his bare toes to keep it headed away  
from the water and freedom.

So Tom found a small stick and turned it  
over.

The beetle's underside was a maze of madly  
kicking legs, and none of the kickings could  
right it again. It had no claws as do ordinary  
bugs—just tiny paddles, similar to the paddles  
for canoes. And even while it was on its back, it  
was still difficult to tell which was its head and  
which was its tail.

Willie bent over and studied it at close range.  
"It couldn't of bit you," he announced. "It  
ain't got no mouth."

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"It did too bite me," Tom insisted. "I felt it, didn't I?"

"Let's see your hand, then."

Tom displayed his hand.

"Why, there ain't any marks or blood or anything," said Willie. "See there? I told yuh it never bit yuh. It ain't got no mouth. Pick it up again. I want to look at it real close."

"You pick it up. I'm scared of it."

"Why, Tom, it never bit yuh! Whatcha so scared for? It ain't got no mouth. How can it bite 'thout a mouth?"

Tom again capitulated. He slid his fingers gingerly around the frantically kicking beetle and took it in the palm of his hand so it was still upside down.

"It's a water beetle," announced Willie judiciously after a long, close inspection. "It's entirely helpless on land; it can't do nothing but swim. Look at its feet. It ain't got any toes or anything. It was them feet you must of felt, Tom. It couldn't of bit yuh."

Tom was more at ease now with his catch; he poked at it with the forefinger of his left hand

PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT and allowed the futilely revolving paddles to tickle his fingertip.

"Look," he said. "It's perfectly harmless. It can't hurt nobody."

"That's what I told yuh," said Willie. "Now, hang onto it till I find a bottle or a can to put it in. We gotta keep it in water or it'll die—just like a fish. Maybe you better hold it under the water while I get a bottle or something. We don't want it to die."

So Tom made a cup of his hands and held the beetle under water while Willie went bottle hunting. The beetle zipped about in Tom's hands, and he could feel queer little tickles from its softly scratching paddles as it swam.

Willie marched into the nearest back yard in search of an empty tin can or other receptacle of a size and shape to accommodate a water beetle. Some housewife had left a mason jar on her otherwise empty back porch; Willie, after a few cautious glances, pilfered that.

He returned with the jar under his shirt and found Tom all excitement again.

"My gosh, Willie, look! The water's just

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cram full of the doggone things! Look at 'em  
all, wouldja!"

Black, shiny beetles whirled about near the surface wherever Willie looked. The water was as thick as soup with them. For by then the cloudburst had sunk in deep enough to soak them out of their hibernating lairs in the dirt-filled cracks between pavement and curbstone, and they had scrambled up in swarms to swim, mate, and breed while the water lasted. The boys did not know all that, of course, but Willie found an even more agreeable explanation for the phenomenon.

"Doggonit!" he announced; "I never seen so many beetles in my life. I betcha it rained 'em this morning. It rains down fish sometimes. I betcha it's been raining beetles around here."

"Aw, how can it?" demanded his brother. "It can't rain beetles."

"Why, it can, too! The clouds suck 'em up outa ponds and things and then rain 'em down some other place. Don't you remember mamma reading us that piece in the paper the other day

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'bout it raining frogs and little fish in Kansas? This is the same thing, only different."

"Geel!" said Tom. He looked at the beetles in wonderment and respect. "Hey, let's catch a whole mess of 'em! Maybe we can sell 'em to people."

"By golly, maybe we can! Put that'n you got in the jar here and then get in there and toss 'em out to me."

The original captive was dropped into the fruit jar, and Tom waded out in the water and scooped up other beetles which he tossed ashore. Willie picked them up and put them in the jar. In no time at all that one jar was full. They hid it in a patch of weeds, went off together, and acquired three more jars, employing the same strategy Willie had used in procuring the first.

When they went home an hour later, they had four mason jars seething full of bewildered water beetles.

"What'll we do with 'em now?" asked Tom. "I betcha they're gonna die in these jars; they can't breathe or nothing."

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"We'll get mamma's new washtub," decided Willie. "That'll give 'em plenty of room."

So, with the garden hose, they filled Mrs. Farrier's bright new tub in which she did the Monday wash, and they poured in their four jars of beetles. The tub became a sort of cosmic system of water beetles, each revolving without thought or orbit. Collisions were perpetual and inevitable. Breeding commenced without warning and went on at a terrific rate. Clots of five or six male beetles with a female in the mad center floated on the water top; similar clots sank to the bottom; and other males, seeking mates, whirled and gyrated around the tub.

It was at this point that Mrs. Farrier's remembrance of the beetles really began, for she had noticed her sons' activity with the new tub from her bedroom window and had decided after short reflection that if the tub were to remain new and shiny she had better go out in the back yard and discover exactly what use her boys intended to make of it. So she went out and looked over their backs into the tub and

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saw the crazy mating maze of the Coleoptera

"Good heavens!" she said. "Where on earth did you get all those bugs?"

"It rained 'em, mamma! It ackshully rained 'em!" Tom told her breathlessly. "We just picked 'em up off the street. Golly, mamma, we think maybe we can sell 'em!"

"Oh, Tommy, it can't rain such things. Where did you ever get that idea?"

Willie became aggrieved. "Why, mamma, you read to us just the other day where it rained frogs and fish in Kansas, didn't yuh?"

"What? . . . Oh, y-e-s . . . I remember. I suppose I did," hedged Mrs. Farrier. "But those were frogs; it didn't say anything about bugs, Willie."

"Yeh, but if it can rain frogs, it oughta be able to rain bugs, too. 'Sides, these are beetles; they ain't bugs, mamma. And there's never been any of these kinda beetles around before or we'd of seen 'em. And this morning it rained like ever'thing. And we found all of 'em in the water that rained down. So it musta rained 'em, mamma. Don'tcha see?"



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"Not exactly," confessed Mrs. Farrier. "But . . . I don't know . . . perhaps it did rain them. Nature does such strange things sometimes. But now, you promise me, Willie, to be careful with that tub. It's practically brand new, and I can't afford another one."

"Oh, we'll be awful careful, mamma. We won't be using it long, anyway, 'cause we expect to sell the beetles real quick."

"Sell them? Why, people won't buy such things, Willie."

"Yeh, but, gosh, mamma, these ain't just ordinary beetles; these was rained down. That makes 'em different and much more valuable. People'll be glad to buy 'em."

"Well . . . I know I wouldn't buy them . . . but perhaps someone will. I hope you make a lot of money. But, look, boys, lunch'll be ready in just a minute. Suppose you come in now and wash your hands. You can sell the beetles after lunch."

"Somebody oughta stay here and guard 'em," said Tom. "Somebody might swipe 'em."

"Oh, nonsense!" said Mrs. Farrier. "They're

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quite safe in the tub. Come on in and wash your hands. There's something you both like for lunch."

After the meal, during which Mrs. Farrier was treated to a long, vivid dissertation on the art of beetle catching, she told Willie and Tom she was going downtown, and she exacted from them elaborate promises that they would be good boys while she was away and not get into any trouble or break anything around the house.

"Why, golly, mamma," they both assured her, "we got those beetles to look after now; we won't have time to do nothing else."

"Well, I hope not," said Mrs. Farrier. And she went off to town, feeling rather friendly and grateful to the black swimmers in her wash-tub for the diversion they were offering to her ever-active sons.

The boys went to the washtub to reinspect their prizes. By then the beetles had concen-

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trated in five large nuptial balls—shiny black masses that floated listlessly in the water.

Willie was disgusted. "The doggone things have gone to sleep. There won't nobody buy 'em when they act like that. Let's get some sticks and stir 'em up and make 'em swim around like they used to."

And they got sticks and stirred the beetles.

It was then that little Mae Wilson and her cousin Elmira from Iowa entered the day's course of events. The Wilson back yard was directly opposite the Farrier back yard, with the alley separating. Little Mae and Elmira were playing with little Mae's dolls there, and they noted the activity of the young Farriers. A feud of long standing existed between little Mae and Willie, but Elmira, unaware of it and being bored with dolls, coaxed little Mae into going over to the Farriers' to see if maybe the boys didn't want to play.

"They won't," said little Mae, "'cause they're perfeckly horrid boys, but we can go anyway just tuh satisfy yuh. I warn yuh, though,

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Elmira, I'm gonna slap that Willie Farrier if he starts calling me names just once more."

"I don't blame yuh," said Elmira. "It ain't right for boys tuh call girls names. Was they bad names, Mae?"

"They was awful," said little Mae. And, with their belligerence already aroused, the girls went calling.

"Hi," said the Farriers indifferently, and continued their beetle-stirring.

Little Mae, as soon as she saw what they were doing, yelled shrilly, "Well, what on earth you mean torturing those poor bugs that way for? You both stop it this minute!"

"Shut up," said Willie. "You're so dumb you don't know what this is all about."

Elmira was as horrified as little Mae. "Don't you dare talk to her thataway! An' you boys quit hittin' them bugs with yer ole sticks. Whatcha got 'em in that tub fer? You'll drown 'em! I never heard of such a thing—puttin' bugs in water an' then beatin' at 'em with clubs. I'm gonna tell yer mother on yuh!"

"Lissen," said Willie. "It ain't either of yuh's

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doggone business what we're doing with these beetles. Beetles—not bugs. D'yuh understand? And they ain't none of your business. You all ain't got no business in our yard, either. This here is our property, and we can do what we like here. So g'wan home if you don't like it. Nobody asked yuh to come in the first place."

Said little Mae in a very dangerous tone, "Don't you dare talk to me like that, Willie Farrier. You better turn them bugs loose and quit torturing 'em, er I'll tell Mister Paisley on yuh, and you know what he'll do."

Mr. Elmer Paisley was secretary for the local Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

"Old Elmer Paisley ain't got nothing to do with this," retorted Willie. "He don't bother 'bout nothing but dogs and horses. And you better go on home like I already told you, or you're liable to get into trouble."

"Oh, I am, am I?" said little Mae. "Well, I'll show you something, Mister Willie Farrier, right now!"

And she seized the handle of the washtub

PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT and jerked the tub over, emptying water and beetles all over the ground.

"There!" said little Mae.

Willie and Tom, shocked and surprised, leaped to action both vocal and physical.

"Why, doggone yuh, I'm gonna kill yuh!" snarled Willie. And Tom yelped, "Durned old girls, I'm gonna kill yuh, too!"

Tom took a whack at Elmira with the stick he had used to stir the beetles and broke the crystal of her wrist watch. She yowled and retreated. Little Mae landed a heavy slap on Willie before he could slap her back, but she retreated, also.

"Git rocks, Tom!" ordered Willie. "Git rocks and knock their doggone heads off! We'll show 'em."

No rocks were immediately at hand; Tom made a hasty mudball instead, utilizing earth dampened by water from the overturned tub. He scored a direct hit on little Mae.

"Good!" said Willie, and clawed up some mud himself.

From this tactic the girls retreated still far-

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ther—even to the Wilson back yard—but they were far from defeated. They made mudballs of their own, and the war was on.

The war raged back and forth with the alley a sort of no-man's land, till, foot by foot, the girls were driven back and took up a last stand under the lee of the Wilson house. The girls couldn't get inside because Mrs. Wilson, who, like Mrs. Farrier, had also gone downtown, had absentmindedly locked all the doors while the girls were playing outside; hence, the interior was spared the ravages of battle, but the outside suffered doubly.

Available mud for the Farriers soon gave out, but the Wilson garden hose was handy, and Willie created more by turning on the hose and making a mixture in the soft soil about the Wilson tomato vines. The entire Wilson house with its fresh coat of hardly dry white paint became splotted and dripping from the impact of the slushy mud missiles; the windows shuddered as mudballs splurged into them.

For a long while the girls gave back as good as they received. Although slightly aghast at

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first at the conflagration their lack of tact had created, once they became all over mud and disarray they entered the affray wholeheartedly and abandonedly. They developed a better battle system than the Farriers. Little Mae made the mudballs and Elmira hurled them; she had a powerful throwing arm for a girl and was unusually accurate. Once, indeed, she centered a very squashy gob squarely on Willie's forehead; it splattered into his eyes and momentarily blinded him. Tom, thinking his brother badly hurt, yanked up a stick that supported a tomato vine and made to enter in vengeful hand-to-hand combat. But Elmira threw as fast as she could swing her arm, drove him back ignominiously, and made him keep his distance.

All things, of course, end sooner or later; the great mudball war ended when Mr. Wilson came home from town and went hurriedly to the rear of his house to see what the rumpus was about. Loud, bitter, and surprised exclamations issued from the lips of Mr. Wilson; the Farrier boys, daunted at last, fell back without bothering to pause for explanations.



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But now they were explaining it very fully to their mother. They told her the whole sorrowful, embittered tale.

"Mamma, them girls didn't have no right to come over."

"Mamma, they went and started the whole thing."

"Mamma, they went and dumped out our beetles."

"And the beetles all got away, and now we can't sell 'em or anything, 'cause it probably never will rain beetles 'round here again."

"It was all their fault, mamma, and it don't make no difference if the durned old house did get a little mud on it. Them girls slung just as much mud as we did, anyway."

"You ought to have 'em arrested, mamma, for turning loose our beetles."

Mrs. Farrier at length said, "Heavens and earth, I don't want to hear another single word about it from either of you. Perhaps you do have a certain amount of justice on your side, but, remember, Willie, and you, too, Tom, that I'm not going to permit anything like this

PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT again. You've got to settle your difficulties in more peaceable ways. Anyhow, I don't blame Mister Wilson for being angry, and goodness only knows what the rest of the neighbors will think."

"They ain't got no right to think anything," declared Willie. "We were minding our own business in our own back yard. It's just when people come pestering around that trouble starts."



## *Chapter Two*

---

**T**HE WILSON HOUSE had been washed clean again, the water-beetle incident had been forgotten, and the neighborhood, as far as the actions of the Farrier boys had any effect on it, was characterized by peace and quiet.

For Tom and Willie had found a thing of mystery and excitement in the shape and guise

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of a small, triangular pond on the outskirts of town, not a quarter of a mile from the end of the pavement. Frogpond, they called it, in honor of the myriad frogs which dwelled there. Mornings and afternoons they spent at Frogpond; and they would have spent evenings there, too, perhaps, except that their mother insisted on drawing the line somewhere.

The fascination of the pond lay in the frogs it harbored. Frogs were there in all shapes and sizes and stages. Eggs hatched into polliwogs under the amazed eyes of the Farriers, and, still later, the polliwogs metamorphosed into frogs.

They watched the whole cycle of frog life from earliest beginning to startling climax.

It began with a weird music, the wooing songs of the frogs, a music which drifted up out of Frogpond, hovered over the cow pastures, crossed the railroad tracks and drifted up the town's streets till it reached the open windows of the Farrier home. The music came nightly:

Rup, rup, aaah!

Rup, rup, aaaaaah!

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It seemed to carry with it a sort of restless yearning.

Willie Farrier asked, "What is that funny singing, mamma? Hear it? It's that way every night now."

"Oh, it's only the frogs, Willie. They always sing like that in the summer."

"But where are they, mamma?"

"Oh, in little puddles and things, I suppose. I'm not sure."

"Yeh, but what do they wanta make all that racket for?"

"Oh, Willie, I don't know. It's just the way frogs act. Like roosters crowing."

"Yeh, but, mamma, roosters crow 'cause it's morning and the sun's coming up, don't they? Heck, frogs don't pay no 'tention to things like that."

"Well, all right, then, Willie! If you're so interested in the frogs, why don't you go out and watch them? Then you'll know all about them, and I won't have to answer all these awful questions."

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“Yeh, but how we gonna find where they’re at?”

“Well, you’ll just have to look for them.”

And one morning, half way between breakfast and noon, it rained—shortly and heavily and suddenly. And when it was over the music of the frogs arose with an abrupt, tenuous wail. It was the first time the Farrier boys had ever heard that music in the daylight.

“Gee, Willie!” said Tom. “Now we can find out where they are; we can follow that noise they’re making.”

And they followed down the singing of the green minstrels—down the town’s streets, past the end of the pavement, across the tracks and the cow pastures—and they found the little pond.

As they gained its banks, the frogs hushed their singing, and the boys had to look long and closely before they found a single chorister. But at last they saw one; calm and green he squatted with palpitating throat upon a pat of mud. He was without a bit of cover, but his greenness was such that it blended even with the

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mud. And, after they had seen that first one, they found a multitude of others; for, as they walked along the bank, frogs sprang out from under their feet as if they were suddenly ignited firecrackers and did quick, neat dives into the pool. There, they kicked to the bottom and hid under leaves and loose muck, or, disdaining to hide, swam boldly to the middle, there to float sprawingly with legs outspread and eyes and nostrils just above the water top.

The boys never imagined that so many frogs could be in such a small area. They splashed around wildly after them until they managed at last to catch one with their bare hands.

It was Willie who did the actual catching. He was knee-deep in the pond, and Tom was out on the bank. A ten-inch leopard frog, alarmed at Tom's approaching bare feet, soared into the air, dove into the water, and took up a place of refuge between Willie's feet. Willie reached into water with both hands and picked him up.

"I got him! I got him!" he exulted, and Tom waded out beside him, exulting also.

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"Gee, he feels real slick and greasy," said Tom, fingering the amphibian's legs. "Look how shiny white he is underneath. Why, he don't have no scales or anything like a fish does."

"Heck, no, he don't have no scales," said Willie. "He's just got a skin. Doggone, look how wide his feet spread out! That's how he can swim so good."

"Yeh, but his front feet don't amount to nothing at all," objected Tom.

"Well, he don't need no front feet, 'cept just to set on. These big hind ones are plenty to jump and swim with."

And, at that moment, the frog sneaked one of his big hind feet up under him, pried himself loose from Willie's relaxed hand, and leaped ten feet out into the middle of the pond. That was the last they saw of him, although they waded all over in desperate search.

Tired at last, they returned home and told their mother of the discovery of Frogpond and of the big one they had caught.



## PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT

"I betcha," said Tom, "he was one of them we heard singing so much ever' night."

"He might have been," agreed Mrs. Farrier. "But why did you have to get into the pond and get all wet and muddy? Why, you both might have drowned."

"Aw, mamma, the pond ain't but a little bitty thing," Willie assured her. "It ain't but knee deep, and it ain't any wider than this room. 'Sides, we had to get in, 'cause you can't catch frogs out on the bank: they always jump in so quick."

"Yes, but why do you have to catch them?"

"Why, mamma, that's the only way you can find out anything about 'em! Heck, yuh can't just look at 'em from a distance; yuh gotta catch 'em."

And, after that, they went to the pond every day, and spent nearly every hour of the day there. Finally there came that queer, uncertain hour when they saw the frogs begin to mate after days of preliminary singing. The little males gripped the greater females under armpits and rode up and down and around the

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pond, fertilizing the strings of eggs that spewed out behind, eggs black and shiny as nocturnal pearls. Tom and Willie weren't sure just what it was they were watching, but they felt an uneasiness in being spectators—as if they were witnessing things more properly secret. But the frogs did not seem to mind, and the boys stayed on and watched, and talked in whispers.

The eggs they identified as such instinctively. All over the pond they were; literally millions of them. It really seemed a waste; too many, far too many eggs for that tiny pond.

And they saw the eggs begin to grow, and they saw queer changes take place in them, for every day they picked up handfuls of the things and re-examined them. Had they had a microscope they could have watched cleavage set in and seen each of the single, unique cells, through its own inherent power, divide itself geometrically into many cells no longer unique. And they could have seen the cells diversify, evaginate, build upon one another, achieving form and modifying it in their age-old task of making themselves into a proper frog.

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One day, polliwogs began to appear from the eggs: a head, a mouth, a stomach, a tail. That was all.

The boys were alarmed. Things did not seem to be turning out correctly. Tom held three tiny black polliwogs disappointedly in his hand. "These here ain't frogs at all," he pointed out to Willie. "They look like fish kinda. Them things we thought was frog eggs couldn't of been frog eggs. They must of been fish eggs 'cause these durned things're fish."

Willie was equally disconcerted, but not convinced. "Yeh, but the frogs laid them doggone eggs; we saw 'em. Don't you remember?"

"Sure. But these things ain't frogs. My gosh, frogs don't look nothing like this. We musta got the eggs mixed up or something."

They took their troubles to their mother.

"Mamma, can frogs' eggs turn into fish?"

"No, indeed," said Mrs. Farrier. "No more than chicken eggs can turn into dogs."

"Well, they do out at Frogpond," said Tom.

"Oh, they can't, Tommy! It's impossible."

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"Well, mamma, we saw the frogs lay the eggs, and we watched the eggs ever' day till they hatched out; but they went and hatched out silly little black fish—not frogs at all."

"You must have made a mistake somewhere," said Mrs. Farrier.

The mystery seemed to clear a few days later when Willie caught a *Hyla crucifer*, which is a very tiny frog with a little green cross on its back. He found it in one of the depressions his own heel had made the day before in the stiff mud; it looked small enough to have been concealed in one of the larger leopard-frog eggs.

"Hey!" he said triumphantly to Tom. "Here's one of them doggone baby frogs. No wonder we ain't seen any of 'em before; they must get out in the grass and hide. Look how cute he is."

Tom looked and agreed, and everything was right again.

But then, after a while, the polliwogs began to grow; mysteriously they changed shape in a manner which the boys doubted fish ever acted.

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"But maybe they're a different kind of fish," said Tom.

That satisfied them until the following week when they caught a polliwog which possessed one hind leg.

"My gosh," they said. "Now what's happening to the crazy things?"

They caught more polliwogs, determined to find out. Some of the new ones exhibited two hind feet; a couple of them had two hind ones and one little helpless forefoot. And then they found one with all four feet exposed—but it still flaunted its long fish tail.

"Let's take this one home," said Willie. "I betcha it's a freak or something."

They took it home in a can of water, and proudly they showed it to their mother. But the adolescent amphibian which held for them such a store of all that was mysterious and full of wonderment was merely fantastic and repulsive to her, and she wouldn't come close to it. She made them keep it in its can in a box in the woodshed.

It changed into a frog so suddenly that a long

PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT time was required before the boys really believed what they saw. But when they eventually were convinced their jubilation was excessive.

“By golly, them things was frog eggs, sure enough!” they told each other over and over. “I knew we’d seen frogs lay ’em. But who’d a-thought that doggone frogs was born that way?”

Starry-eyed and eager, they told their mother of the whole process, step by step, as they had observed it at Frogpond. She listened to their eager tale with half her mind absent from its implications. It was only later that she began really to brood about what was happening to her boys’ minds.



### *Chapter Three*

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**M**RS. FARRIER had been by turns amused, amazed, and exasperated by the interests which successively held her sons' attention, but the discoveries at Frogpond gave a new direction to her thoughts. The more she reflected on them the more she decided she was greatly distressed by their frank enthusiasm for the high mysteries of amphibian sex life and reproduction. She felt it was not right for two such small boys to have witnessed so much and to be able to recount it with such accuracy and delight.

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She doubted if she was bringing them up properly.

So, not knowing quite what else to do, she took the matter up with the Reverend Mr. Jackson, pastor of Grace Episcopal Church. She wound up by saying, "And that's all they talk about any more, Mister Jackson. It's just awful. I don't know what to think. Isn't there something I can do about it?"

Mr. Jackson pulled at his lip. "There is," he said, "nothing essentially wrong in their knowing such things. Of course, it is a pity they are not somewhat older. I believe the best thing to do is to distract their attention from the frogs and center it on something else. Boys never concentrate on things very long. Find something else to interest them, Misses Farrier."

"But bugs and frogs and things for pets are all that does interest them!" wailed Mrs. Farrier.

"Very well! Get them some other pet! Some less . . . uh . . . exotic pet, if that's the word I want. Get them a chicken, Misses Farrier!"

"A chicken?"



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"Yes. Certainly. They evidence interest in pets, you say. Very well! Get them a pet that is domesticated—something which will be profitable for them to study and care for. In that way, you mold and shape your sons' natural inclinations. They have this zest for observing animal life. Very well! Put it to use, Misses Farrier."

"Well, I don't know," she said doubtfully. "I just can't picture them, somehow, getting very excited about a chicken . . . but I'll try."

She called her boys to her next morning. "If," she said, "you will both promise me faithfully to take good care of them, I will get you some chickens, and you may have them for pets. They're far more interesting than frogs, and, if they lay any eggs, we can have them for breakfast."

No immediate enthusiasm was discernible on her sons' countenances. In fact, Willie said, "Aw, heck, mamma, chickens are so *dumb*. Ever'body, pretty near, has got chickens."

"They're not dumb at all," said Mrs. Farrier

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firmly. She knew if the boys ever started arguing it would mean the end of the chicken project. "You've never had any chickens, so you don't know a single thing about them. As a matter of fact, chickens are very interesting. You can even train them to do little tricks. When I was a girl I had a bantam rooster that would ride around on my shoulder. I know you'll both love chickens after you have them a while."

"Yeh, but, look, mamma, we like wild stuff that we got to catch. Don't we, Tom? Like those frogs at Frogpond."

"Uh huh," said Tom. "Chickens ain't no fun at all. They're dumb. Ever'body's got 'em."

"Nevertheless," said Mrs. Farrier in desperation, "I think it would be good for you to have some chickens. If, after a month or so, you decide you don't like them, you can get rid of them. But I'm going to insist that you give them a fair trial."

She called the community market where the local farmers sold their wares through a sort of brokerage system. The clerk there, who knew

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her, told her she could get young live pullets for fifty cents apiece.

"Now, Willie," she said, "here's a dollar and a half. You and Tom go to the market and buy three pullets. The clerk knows you're coming, and he'll see that you get nice ones. He'll put them in a box for you, and you bring them home. You can keep them in the woodshed till you build them a regular coop."

The boys went to market, but went reluctantly. "Doggone," they kept wondering to each other, "whur did mamma ever get the idear we wanted any old fool chickens?"

The market, a hollow square with pens all around, aroused their interest slightly. Its acrid poultry smell piqued their nostrils, and the cries of the fowls piqued their ears. They wandered round and round, talking and looking.

Just at the end of their tour of inspection, they saw the muscovy drake. After seeing him that once, they looked at nothing else.

He was a huge snow-white brute of a duck with wattles that were blood red and a thin, cruelly hooked yellow beak. His short tail

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feathers curled into tight knots; his gnarled webbed feet were broader than the boys' outspread hands. He was arrogant and rude and in a vile temper, and he flew at them whenever they came too close to his bars. They looked at him and fell in love with him, for he was no ordinary barnyard fowl. He was something heraldic, as strange as a wild bird from a wild, far-off island. They looked at him and decided they must have him.

They went straightway to the clerk.

"We're Misses Farrier's kids," Willie told him, "and we come to get that big white duck down there . . . if he ain't too expensive."

"Now, wait a minute," said the clerk. "I thought yer mother said you was to git some chickens. I know cockeyed well she did."

"Naw," said Willie. "Mamma said we could get chickens if we didn't find nothing else that suited us better. But we think now we'll take that duck."

"Well, I think now I'd better phone yer old lady and make sure," said the clerk.

"It won't do no good," said Willie. "She

PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT went downtown and won't be back for a long time."

"Well . . . look here: are you kids lying to me?"

"No, sir. If mamma'd seen the duck 'fore she called yuh, she a-said for you to sell it to us 'stead of any old fool chickens."

"Well . . . all right. It's not my funeral. Come on and git it. It's two bucks."

Both boys said simultaneously, "Good gosh!"

"Now what's the matter?" demanded the clerk.

"We ain't got that much money."

"How much have you got?"

"Dollar and a half."

"Well, that's just too tough, boys. The duck's two bucks. Old man Renfro brought it in from the farm and put the price on it himself."

The boys were very near to tears. "Wouldn't Mister Renfro sell it just a little cheaper?" Tom finally asked.

"I dunno. Whyn't yuh ask him? There he is over there—the big guy in the straw hat. It's his duck."

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They went dubiously to Mr. Renfro.

"Mister Renfro . . ."

"That's me, gentlemen."

"Uh . . . we wanta buy yer duck."

"My duck? Here, now, you ought to break these things to a fellah more gentle-like. Which duck? I've got better'n three hundred."

"We mean the big white one in the coop over there," said Willie timidly.

"Oh! Well, now, that can be arranged real simple-like. Two bucks, an' the bird's yers forever."

"But we ain't got but a dollar and a half," explained Tom.

"No sale," said Mr. Renfro.

"Aw, gosh, couldn't you please just sell him to us a little bit cheaper?"

Mr. Renfro looked at the boys carefully for the first time. They were twitching with nervousness, and their eyes were full of tears.

"Hey, wait a minute!" he protested. "Don't make yerselves sick over it, fer gosh sakes. What do you kids want with a fool duck, anyhow?"

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"We want him for a pet," sobbed Tom. "But we ain't got but a dollar and a half."

"Here, here!" said Mr. Renfro. "Take it easy, boy. Take it easy. Who are you kids? What's yer names?"

"We're Misses Farrier's boys," said Willie.

"Do you know 'em?" Mr. Renfro asked the clerk.

"I know their mother," said the clerk. "They're all right, I guess."

"Well, leave 'em have the damn duck, then," said Mr. Renfro. "I never did see kids act such a way before. Lord!"

"You mean we can have it for a dollar and a half?" asked Willie.

"Yep. Take it and get out of here."

"Oh, gee! Thanks! Gosh, that's nice of yuh! C'mon, Tom!"

"Wait! Wait!" said the clerk. "How you going to get him home?"

"Aw, we can carry him," said Willie. "Under our arms."

"Aw, no, you can't," said Mr. Renfro. "That drake's a regular man-killer. Get a gunny sack

PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT and pack him home in that. If he starts to act rambunctious, slap him up agin a telephone pole, and that'll tone him down."

The clerk found a burlap bag and attempted to sack up the fowl.

At once a magnificent battle took place. The drake used wings and claws and beak; the clerk fished about feebly with one hand. When the battle was over the drake still huffed and snorted in the coop, the clerk was blown and perspiring, and his hand and forearm were lacerated and scratched.

"That thing sure 'nough is a man-killer," he acknowledged to Mr. Renfro.

Mr. Renfro had watched the battle with a great deal of interest. "I'll git the so-and-so out of there for you," he said determinedly. "You mustn't fool around the way you do. After all, that ain't no weak-kneed chicken in there. That's a real bird. Hold the sack wide open, boys; I aim to git some action."

Mr. Renfro shoved his big brawny arm into the pen, and, after long preliminary maneu-



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vers, got the drake by the neck and choked it  
down.

“Look out! Yer gonna kill it!” screamed  
Willie.

“Shut up!” grunted Mr. Renfro. “Who’s  
catching this duck? Git ready with that bag like  
I tole yuh.”

He yanked the drake out in a rumpled mass  
and thrust it deep into the burlap sack. He  
twisted a length of baling wire about the sack’s  
mouth, sealing it tight.

“There! That’s the way to handle ’em! Now,  
take the fool thing and git out of here.”

Willie picked up the sack at one end and  
Tom picked up the other. They left the mar-  
ket in jubilation. The drake squawked and  
thrashed about and made rousing trouble in  
the sack, but the boys never released their grips  
till they got him home.

Tom said, “We better get him in the wood-  
shed ’fore we let him out.”

Willie said, “Yeh, and we better close the  
door good, too.”

Their mother was on the back porch as they

PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT came into the yard. She called to them brightly, "Did you get nice chickens, boys?"

They looked at each other in alarm; they had forgotten her completely.

Willie said in a low voice, "Better go ahead and tell her and get it over with." And in a loud and studiedly casual voice he said, "Mamma, the chickens they had there weren't no good, so we got us a duck instead."

"A duck? Willie, I told you plainly to get chickens!"

"But, mamma, the chickens wasn't any good."

"Now, Willie, why can't you ever do as you're told?"

"Aw, mamma, they ain't really much difference between chickens and ducks, 'cept that ducks are lots better. Gee, we got a swell duck, mamma!"

"Let me see it," said Mrs. Farrier.

"Well, you'll hafta look at him in the woodshed, mamma, for he's kinda wild. It'll be a couple of days 'fore we get him tamed good."

"For heaven's sake, what kind of duck is it?"

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"It's a big white one," said Tom.

Mrs. Farrier went with her sons to the woodshed. There, they entered, closed the door carefully, and let their prize out of the sack. The prize appraised his new surroundings and masters with loud, exasperated hisses. He took immediate command of the interior of the woodshed. First, he stalked about haughtily, flapping his wings and nibbling at his back feathers. Then he made a quick rush at Tom and drove him into a corner. He made a similar rush at Mrs. Farrier and drove her to the door. He hissed warningly at Willie, plainly indicating to him to keep his distance.

"Now, what in the world," said Mrs. Farrier in distress, "will you ever be able to do with the horrible thing? He won't ever get tame or gentle. I never saw such ferocity in all my life."

"Aw, mamma," Willie assured her, "if we just let him alone for a while till he sorta gets used to the place, he'll be all right. I think he'll get real tame, mamma."

"Well, you watch him while I get out of here. I might have known something like this

PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT would happen. I send you down to get three nice little chickens, and you come back with this atrocious goose, or whatever it is. Really, Willie, I don't know what to think of you sometimes. I'm awfully provoked."

"Yeh, but, heck, mamma, he can't hurt nothing in the shed."

"Well, mind you keep him here, then. You remember that, too, Tom; don't ever let him out of here."

"Aw, we'll take good care of him, mamma. Gee, I guess we ought to feed him. What does he eat, mamma?"

"Raw meat, from the looks of him," said Mrs. Farrier. "But, come on in, and I'll give you some bread crusts. He might like them. He ought to have a pan of water, too."

They fed their great drake and watered him, and, after subsequent experimental feedings, they found he would eat anything and everything in the way of fish, flesh, fowl, fruit, root, or leafy vegetable or insect. He had an overwhelming, outrageous appetite, and his table

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manners were terrible. He would rush upon the boys when they came bearing him food-stuffs, knock the pan from their hands, batter them away with his thrashing wings, and gobble up ravenously every speck of what they brought him. Then he would strut about and hiss at them, dash his head into his pan of water, throwing drops and rivulets over his back and tail, and, done with that rite, he would march up and face them and make loud, guttural noises in demand of more food.

On the whole, however, the drake's career in the woodshed was harmless and fairly peaceable. It was when the boys prevailed upon their mother to let them take him out for an airing that travail began in the neighborhood.

They said one day, "Heck, mamma, he's getting so tame now that he'll eat out of his pan real gentle-like without first trying to knock it outta your hand like he used to all the time. Why can't we just tie a cord to his leg and take him out so's he can walk around a little? He's probably awful tired of being cooped up in the woodshed all the time."

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"No," said Mrs. Farrier. "I still don't trust him."

"But, mamma, there can't possibly nothing happen. We'll tie a good, strong cord to his leg, and we'll watch him real close."

"No."

"Aw, mamma, please!"

"Well . . . but just for a little while."

So they secured a long piece of jute wrapping twine and went to give their drake an airing.

A wild ten-minute free-for-all took place before they overpowered him and hobbled him with the string. Shaken and definitely uncertain, they were nevertheless determined to go through with the project; they opened the door and ushered him out.

The drake strode out scolding and gabbling, turning now and then to hiss violently at them without the faintest trace of conciliation or gratitude in his tone. He proved exceptionally intractable on his leash, and they discovered almost at once that the sole way to make any progress was to follow along behind him wher-

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ever he wanted to go and not attempt to guide  
him themselves.

He toured the back yard haphazardly, muttering discontentedly to himself, and snarling at them whenever the cord impeded his newest whim. He pulled up flowers abandonedly, shaking them about in his beak and spitting them out without eating them. He came upon the washtub half full of water, jumped in with a great delighted splash, and gave himself such a hectic bath that when he was through the boys were as wet as he was from his splashings.

"Maybe we better put him back now," said Tom, who was becoming weary of the strain.

"Yeh, I guess we better," agreed Willie.  
"He's had a good bath and a lotta exercise."

But there was no agreement at all on the part of the drake. At the first tug on the cord, he went into a frenzy. He tried to snatch himself free of them but succeeded only in ignominiously tripping himself when the cord jerked his foot from under him. That brought his rage to the explosion point. He swooped at Willie and buffeted him with his wing knobs. He gave a

PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT lunge at Tom, while Willie yanked desperately at the cord.

Then the cord snapped off at the drake's ankle, and the big white bird was free.

"Golly, he's got loose!" gasped Willie. He jumped for him and made a futile flying tackle.

It was futile because the drake uncovered a brand new accomplishment; at least, it was brand new to the harassed Farriers. He ran a short distance along the ground, spread his wings, flapped mightily, and soared ponderously into the air to light on the roof of the woodshed. There, contemptuously, he looked down at them. Beneath him, all around, were the other back yards of the neighborhood. He surveyed them in triumph. He gave vent to a bugling scream of victory.

"Gosh, how we ever gonna get him back?" despaired Tom.

"I dunno," said Willie. "Maybe we can't."

He was right; they couldn't. The drake looked down at them once more, then catapulted himself from the woodshed roof and went flapping off. They didn't see him again



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for some time, but they heard plenty about him.

Mrs. Farrier, when her sons tearfully told her of their prize's escape, was sincerely and deeply relieved; she even counseled them not to search for him too hard. "He'll get run over, or a dog will kill him, or something. It really isn't much use looking for him," she said.

Tom and Willie did not, at first, look very much, for they didn't know just where to look. They thought that perhaps the drake had flown off to the wilds somewhere and was living as drakes normally should live—amid ponds and mud banks and water-waving greenery. Only a few days were necessary, however, to demonstrate that actually the fowl had remained in the immediate neighborhood and therein had uncovered new deviltries unsuspected even by his former masters.

The first news they heard about him after his escape was brought by Joseph L. (Tar) Beach, who lived a block down the street from the Farriers. Tar Beach was a carpenter who

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sold and installed tar-paper roofs. He was a thin, constantly embittered person; the only pleasure of his life was his chickens: he had a back yard full of fine plymouth rocks which were the feathered apples of his acrimonious eye.

Tar's news about the drake was bad.

He came to the Farrier house the fourth day after the drake had left, and he pounded loudly on the Farrier back door.

"Why, hello, Mister Beach," said Mrs. Farrier. "How are you this morning?"

"Well, I'm a-doing all right, thank ye, but, now, lissen here, Miz Farrier, ain't them kids of your'n got 'em a big ole white duck?"

"Well . . . uh . . . they did have, but it got away a few days ago and we haven't seen it since."

"Uh huh? Yeh. That's what I figgered. That's jest zackly what I figgered. Now, lissen here, Miz Farrier, that there doggone duck got in among my plymouth rocks right early this morning an' he jest raised ole tunket. Yer a lady, Miz Farrier, an' I cain't tell yuh jest what

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it was he did, but I am a-tellin' yuh this: you better keep that critter away from my plym-outh rocks er there'll be hell tuh pay."

"Oh, dear!" said Mrs. Farrier. "Did he hurt your chickens?"

"Well, he like tuh kilt three uh the roosters, m'am, but that ain't nothing at all compared with what he done to my hens. Why, I never seen sech a thing in all my life! A doggone duck actin' thataway with hens! That there duck ain't nacheral, Miz Farrier. Why . . . why, it's a devil—that's what it is, a doggone devil."

"I wish," said Mrs. Farrier, "you would have killed it. I wouldn't have objected in the least."

"Kilt it? Why, doggonit, Miz Farrier, what d'yuh figger I tried tuh do? I went after it with a club the first time, but the doggone thing flew up on the barn and scritch'd at me. So then I went an' got my ole double-bar'l. But I didn't have nothin' but quail loads, an' they didn't faze him a bit. Anyhow, that duck ain't nacheral, an' you better do something about him. He's your'n, ain't he?"

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"But what can I do, Mister Beach?"

"I dunno," said Tar Beach. "But you gotta do something. I cain't have that thing a-botherin' my hens no more like he done. I still dunno what's gonna come of it."

"Well . . . I'll try, Mister Beach. And I'm really awfully sorry that it happened."

"Yer sorry? Well, so'm I sorry. I kin sure tell yuh that!" And Tar Beach went broodingly home, unhappy, uncertain, and indignant over what had befallen his flock.

The drake, in addition to his other unpleasant characteristics, was a fearful and perverted lecher. Tar Beach's placid plymouth rocks had caught the drake's wicked eye that morning, doubtless as he was winging down the alley back of Tar's chicken yard.

He swooped around short and lighted right among them with a loud, lewd gabble. Tar's roosters rushed to the protection of their harem, but there was nothing on earth the mighty muscovy welcomed more than a rough-and-tumble brawl with a choice pullet as

## PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT

the guerdon for the victor. The roosters were already handicapped, for Tar had clipped their spurs to neutralize any fights they might have among themselves; they were virtually helpless against the rage of the drake. He attacked them almost before they showed indication of attacking him; he weighed as much as all three of them together; and his beak and wing knobs did fearful damage.

Once they lay gasping in corners, he turned his attention to the hens. It was while he was vigorously disporting himself among them that Tar came out to see what the excitement was about.

Ordinarily no more profane than the average man, Tar, at the sight of the drake and what he was doing, strained his vocabulary to the point where it was reduced to mere gibberish. He seized a mop handle and made for the white demon. The muscovy saw Tar coming, read his intent, whirled about, and launched himself at Tar's head. Tar's experience with poultry had never encompassed fighting with a horn-mad duck; he retreated without honor.

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When he reappeared on his back-porch stoop, armed with his fowling piece and yelling imprecations, he could not loose a volley, for the drake had shielded himself with hens. And, when the drake did eventually fly to the barn peak, Tar's ill-aimed broadside was ineffective; the light birdshot bounced off the duck as if they were raindrops.

Mrs. Farrier told her boys a censored version of what Tar had told her and sent them out to look for the muscovy. "The moment I set eyes on that duck I knew he was going to make trouble," she said. "Oh, if you'd only gotten chickens as I told you!"

"Yeh, but the doggone thing musta gone crazy," said Willie. "Shoot, I don't see why a duck should wanta fight chickens. I thought they got along swell."

Tom said, "Maybe he's like a eagle or something. They all-a time attack chickens, don't they, mamma?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Farrier, "but not the way your duck does."

Willie and Tom took broom handles and

PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT went off on what was the first of many duck hunts. But they failed to locate the big drake; and the score stood one up for the muscovy and one down for the neighborhood.

Mrs. George Multin, Sr., lived several houses farther down the street from Tar Beach. She was pretty much against pets in general and on principle ("They are such fearful nuisances, my dear!"), and she restricted her son George, Jr., to one rabbit. It was a big fluffy white rabbit named Lulu; it had pink ears and the gentlest of mien. Mrs. Multin had personally selected the rabbit for her son, and she felt toward it a certain tolerance. In fact, whenever Mrs. Multin thought of Lulu it was with definite amiability. For Lulu didn't bark, as would a dog; Lulu didn't have kittens all the time, as would a cat; Lulu didn't require a lot of care, as would a canary; and Lulu's wasn't delicate, as is a goldfish. "Furthermore," Mrs. Multin would say, "Lulu isn't outlandish like those horrible things the Farrier boys are always catching and bringing home. I really enjoy

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George Junior's having Lulu. It's educational for boys to have pets."

Mrs. Multin, too, was pretty much against the Farrier boys in general and on principle. "I don't see how a nice woman like Helen Farrier could have had such brats, and if I've told George Junior once I've told him a million times that I'll tan the hide off him if I ever catch him playing with them!"

Lulu had a little hutch where she stayed most of the time, but sometimes in the cool of the morning George, Jr., would put Lulu in the side yard, which was fenced in, and let her hop around and nibble at grass.

And, so, one day when Lulu had been put in the side yard and was hopping about nibbling at grass, Mrs. Multin went to the window and looked out to see if Lulu were all right before she, Mrs. Multin, went to the grocery store.

She looked out the window, and the pleasant smile on her face switched to an expression of frigid horror. For a great white bird with blood-red wattles clustered about its eyes and



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beak was chasing Lulu round and round the fenced side yard. It hissed as undoubtedly hisses a demon; its wings were half-spread like a demon's; its predatory beak was open, avid to seize Lulu.

Lulu doubled and redoubled with astonishing agility; but the great white bird was as relentless as death is supposed to be. It never ceased pursuit for a second; finally, it made a quick turn on its awkward webbed feet, got hold of Lulu by one large pink ear and, at the same time, folded her under its immense wing.

Lulu gave a shrill squeak; there followed a scene which gave Mrs. Multin nightmares for a long while afterward. It was atrocious and outrageous and unbelievable. It was fantastic and downright insane. It was incredible that such a thing could happen on a sunny summer morning in the Multins' fenced side yard. And the most hideous thing about it all was that Lulu seemed to enjoy it. It was as if Lulu were, indeed, another Leda. . . .

"Lulu! Lulu!" screamed Mrs. Multin. "Stop

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that! Get away from that awful thing! Oh, Lulu . . . how could you . . . oh, dear!"

She felt that she ought to interfere, but she didn't quite know how to go about it. She remained inside and had a case of nerves until George, Jr., came home.

"Go out right away and look at Lulu," she ordered. "It was the most ghastly thing! I'm afraid to step foot out of the house."

"What was it happened, mother?" asked her bewildered son.

"A big white bird attacked Lulu. It was awful, I tell you. Go see if she's all right."

Lulu seemed to be, as far as George, Jr.'s, cursory examination could indicate. "What was it happened to her, mother?" he pressed. "I cain't see nothing wrong."

"Well, I still can't believe it, George Junior. But I looked out the window, and there was a horrible goose or something chasing her about. I thought surely it would . . . uh . . . kill her."

"Was it a big ole white duck?" asked George, Jr.

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"Oh, heavens, it was far too large for a duck!"

"I betcha," said George, Jr., inspiredly, "it was that doggone duck that Tom and Willie Farrier got at the market last month. They tole me it got away and that ole Tar Beach was raising cain 'cause it like to killed some of his chickens."

"Lord, I might have known it came from the Farriers!" cried Mrs. Multin. "I'm going to call that woman up and tell her a few things! The idea of letting something dangerous like that loose in the neighborhood! And you see here, George Junior, if I ever catch you playing with those Farrier boys, I'll . . . I'll tan the hide right offen you!"

She phoned Mrs. Farrier.

"But, Misses Multin," pleaded Mrs. Farrier, "what can I do? The duck escaped last week, and we never have been able to catch him again. I'm terribly sorry, naturally, about Lulu, but this whole duck business has gotten completely out of my control."

"You should never have let your boys get

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the thing in the first place," was all the comfort Mrs. Multin would give her. "I've a good mind to complain to the police."

That evening Mrs. Farrier went to call on her best friend, rich, old Mrs. Barsdel who lived one block over and two blocks down. She poured out all her woes to Mrs. Barsdel.

Mrs. Barsdel, to Mrs. Farrier's surprise, cackled with unbridled glee. "Why, that's the funniest thing I ever heard tell of!" she exclaimed. "A duck scaring folks so! Haw, haw, haw! Too bad we don't have more of them ducks around here. Might wake people up."

Her unsuppressed enthusiasm for the drake's doings aroused a similar, if not quite as hearty, enthusiasm in Helen Farrier; and Mrs. Farrier went away from her visit to Mrs. Barsdel thinking that perhaps the drake might not be the unadulterated villain she had long considered him.

Mrs. Barsdel herself went to bed that night still cackling intermittently over the muscovy. And, when she arose in the morning, she re-

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membered him again and cackled all over. She ate a large and leisurely breakfast; then, as was her wont, went to her garden to feed her goldfish.

She had the largest and most beautiful goldfish pool in town. It was as big as a wading pool and almost deep enough to swim in. At one end of it there stood a mirrored gazing globe, larger than a man's head. It rested on a slender bronze pillar, and it mirrored the goldfish pool and the entire garden. It was very lovely.

Mrs. Barsdel would have nothing in her pool but Japanese fantails, the pearly colored beauties with huge cloudlike tails, lacy, delicate fins, and scales so minute and transparent that even the intestines within the fish are clearly visible. Her fish were so tame that they would eat from Mrs. Barsdel's fingers, and they always swarmed to the pool top at the first sign of her approach. She loved them very much; she had named each one, and she spent much time talking to them.

So, after a large and leisurely breakfast, Mrs.

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Barsdel went out in her garden to feed her goldfish. But even as Tar Beach had discovered in his chicken yard and as Mrs. Multin had discovered in her side yard, so also did Mrs. Barsdel discover in her fish pool an intruder.

The muscovy drake rode high on the water with all the aplomb in the world; as methodical as a Chinese fisherman's trained cormorant, he hunted down the goldfish. They could not escape him by seeking refuge in deep water, for he could dive like an otter and his great beak never missed. Mrs. Barsdel was privileged to watch him make his last splendid dive and catch poor Pitty Sing, her final fantail. His craw already bulged with Pitty Sing's fourteen former companions.

The drake rose to the surface with a swirl, Pitty Sing flopping feebly in his beak. He eyed Mrs. Barsdel angrily, threw up his head to swallow Pitty Sing with a gurgling gulp, and hissed at Mrs. Barsdel, treading water and plainly on his guard.

Mrs. Barsdel was a strong-minded woman, not one to be cowed by a duck. She snatched

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up a convenient garden rake and made for him, intent on slaughter or worse. For some reason, the drake decided against fighting back; instead of returning the attack, he took to the air. He rose from the goldfish pond with the speedy ponderosity of a large amphibian plane, and, as he left it with a grand noisy rush, knocked over the gazing globe with his left wingtip and smashed it to smithereens on the concrete.

Mrs. Barsdel followed in the footsteps of Tar Beach and Mrs. Multin; she called up Helen Farrier, read the riot act, and emptied out vials of wrath.

"An'," yelled Mrs. Barsdel over the telephone in peroration, "when I seen that damn duck swaller poor Pitty Sing an' then bust my mirror ball, why, I could of jest set down an' bawled!"

Mrs. Farrier did weep. The thing was getting to be too much for her, and she gave way to despair. When her sons came in for lunch, though, she had herself more or less under control and decided to go through the whole matter with them again.

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"Willie, this just can't go on any further. You and Tom simply have to catch that awful duck and chop off his head or something. I won't have the neighbors call me up every day and scream at me. I just won't have it!"

"But, mamma, we cain't catch him!" Willie wailed. "We been trying our durndest, too. We seen him the other day over to Thompson's grocery trying to get at some chickens Mister Thompson had in a coop there, but, gosh, he flew off 'fore we could get within fifty feet of him. Gosh, mamma, you really oughtta see him now. He can fly just like a eagle or something!"

"I never want to see the beastly thing again!" snorted Mrs. Farrier. "But if you can't catch your own pet duck, I'm going to get somebody that can."

Said Willie scornfully, "I'd like tuh see anybody catch him if we cain't. Who you gonna get?"

"I'm going to get the police," said Mrs. Farrier determinedly. And she went straight to the telephone. Tom and Willie sat very silent; it was the first time their mother had ever had



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to have recourse to the police. It must be very serious.

After the chief of police had talked to Mrs. Farrier, he hung up the receiver and said to a patrolman, "Well, kin you tie that up?"

"What?"

"It's Miz Farrier. She claims her kids had 'em a pet duck. It got loose a while back, and now it's raising hell all over the neighborhood, and ever'body's scared of the thing. She wants us to go get it."

"Shouldn't be no trick to that," said the patrolman.

"Yeh, but kin you imagine anybody so dumb that they got to call the p'lice department to help 'em catch a damn duck?"

"Well, it takes lots uh people to make the world," philosophized the patrolman.

"Horsecollar," said the chief. But he also said, "I guess you better go on over to her place and catch it fer 'em, anyhow."

"Do I git to keep it if I catch it?" asked the patrolman.

"That's up to Miz Farrier," said the chief.

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There was a knocking at the Farrier front door. Willie opened it and found a burly, blue-coated policeman.

"Hello, laddie," said the officer. "You the folks with the duck?"

"We hadda duck," admitted Willie timidly, "but it got away."

"Yer the folks I'm looking for, then," said the policeman. "Whur's yer mother?"

"Gosh, you ain't gonna arrest us, are yuh?"

"Haw, haw, haw! Nope. I just come down to catch yer duck fer yuh. I got a reputation on the force fer being the finest duck-catcher west of the Mississippi River, and I got to keep in practice."

So Willie summoned his mother. She told the policeman to be very careful; the drake was accounted to be uncommonly vicious.

"Oh, I'll handle him, m'am," he assured her. "Don't worry 'bout me a-tall. Whatcha want done with him when I git him?"

"Oh, dear, take him away and do anything you like—except return him here!"

"Kin I have him?"

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"You certainly can—with my blessing!"

"Well, thanks, Miz Farrier," said the delighted officer. "We ain't et no duck over to our place fer so long that I'm halfway scared the old lady's fergot how to cook 'em. But mebbe she kin git her hand in again."

And he said to the Farrier sons, "How 'bout you two gennelmen showing me the stomping ground of this here renegade, if yer mamma kin spare yuh fer a few minutes?"

"They'll be glad to help any way they can," said Mrs. Farrier. And the boys said, "Gosh, yes!"

Proud to be guides for a uniformed officer with a big revolver, they led him out through the back yard and down the alley.

"It was over there," said Willie, pointing, "that he like to killed George Junior Multin's rabbit."

"Over on that next block," said Tom, also pointing, "is where he ate all Miz Barsdel's goldfish."

"Down here a little ways," said Willie, "is

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where he killed a lot of old Tar Beach's  
chickens."

"That duck certainly gets around," said the  
policeman.

"I never could figger," mused Willie, "what  
made him get so mean that way all of a sudden.  
Why, he was just as gentle when we first got  
him, wasn't he, Tom?"

"Kinda," said Tom.

They were in the alley at the rear of Tar  
Beach's place, and, just as they arrived there,  
a roaring noise and a cloud of smoke came from  
Tar's chicken yard. It was followed by a fancy  
assortment of profanity.

"I betcha," said Willie, "that's old Tar shoot-  
ing at the duck again."

"Well, he better watch hisself firing off fire-  
arms within the city limits," said the police-  
man. "It's strickly agin the law. Come on, boys,  
I wanta talk to that guy."

He pulled open Tar's wooden gate and  
strode in, followed by the Farriers. Sure  
enough, there was Tar with a smoking shotgun  
in his hands. Two tattered, dead plymouth

PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT rocks lay at his feet; other bewildered chickens ran all about. And up on the highest peak of Tar's two-story house, the great white muscovy sat and preened his feathers.

"Look a-here," said the policeman sternly, "it's agin the law to shoot guns in town. You oughtta know that."

"'I God," said Tar Beach, "it ain't agin the law to perteck yer own proputtty, is it?"

"What d'yuh mean?" asked the policeman.

Tar pointed at the miscreant on his rooftop. "That's what I mean! That's the third time this week that daggoned duck has got at my fryin' hens. I'm gonna kill that son of a bastard if it's the last mortal thing I ever do. Look at him a-settin' there on my house laughin' at me! 'I God, wait'll I reload! I went an' kilt two uh my own fryers on account of I missed him jest now while he was amongst 'em on the ground, but I aim tuh give him both bar'ls this time an' shoot the guts clean outta him."

"Now, wait a minute," said the policeman. "I jest got through tellin' yuh it was agin the law tuh shoot in town, didn't I?"

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"Is it agin the law fer *you* to shoot?" demanded Tar.

"Course not. I'm an officer."

"Aw right!" said Tar. "Here." He handed the policeman his shotgun. "Now you shoot him an' ever'thing'll be law-abiding an' jim-dandy."

"Well, I dunno," said the policeman, scratching his head. "I ain't never done nothin' like this before. . . . Still an' all, however, I was sent here with orders to git the duck. I guess mebbe it'll be all right. Gimme a couple uh loads, an' I'll knock him offen there fer yuh. I used tuh be a pretty fair hand at duck-shootin'."

Tar fished around in his pockets; then looked sheepish and irritated. "I ain't got no more loads," he said disgustedly. "That musta been the last I had what I touched off jest now."

"Well, how come yuh missed when he was settin' on the ground?"

"I never missed them there hens," said Tar sadly.

Willie had an idea. "Why don'tcha shoot

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him with your pistol?" he asked the policeman.

"Well," said the officer doubtfully, "it's sorta long range fer hand-gun shootin'."

"Gimme the gun!" cried Tar. "I don't keer how long the range is."

"Nope," said the patrolman. "If there's any more shootin' done, I'm gonna do it."

He took his revolver from its holster, looked at it speculatively, and then at the drake still preening himself on the roof.

"I ain't had much practice lately on account uh pistol loads costin' so doggoned much," he explained, "but mebbe I kin do it. Stand back, you kids; the muzzle blast is bad."

He sighted long and closely, and fired. The drake still preened.

He took the revolver in both hands, sighted still more closely, and fired. The drake still preened.

He rested the revolver against a tree trunk, and fired. The drake still preened.

He lost his temper and fired the three remaining cartridges as fast as he could pull the trigger. The drake still preened.

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The policeman sighed and put away his weapon. "Well," he said, "that's that, I reckon."

"What d'yuh mean 'that's that'?" demanded Tar Beach.

"I ain't got no more loads either," explained the cop.

"Well, what d'yuh aim tuh do?"

"I dunno—'less I go back to the station an' git me a rifle."

"Lordy-Lord! You mean go all the way back on foot?"

"Sure. Whatcha think I came here on—the passenger train?"

"'I God," said Tar despairingly, "I dunno what it is, but that there duck has got a jinx on me. The thing ain't nacheral. I shoot at him a-settin' in my own chicken yard an' miss him a mile an' kill two uh my own fryin' hens. You shoot at him on the roof an' miss him six times. Now, there ain't neither of us got ary loads left fer more shootin', an' the gol-danged thing sets up there an' laughs at us. No, sir, that duck ain't nacheral."



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"Tell yuh what," said the cop. "I hate tuh be beat by a doggone ornery duck, an' I don't aim tuh be. You all stay here an' watch him. I'll hike back to the station quick as I kin an' git me a rifle. I'm a shore cinch tuh hit him with a rifle, even if I cain't with a doggone six-shooter."

"Yeh, but you got ary reason tuh believe he's a-gonna set there an' wait fer yuh to fetch a rifle all the way back here?"

"Well, that's why I want you all tuh watch him. You can sorta foller him if he takes a notion to go somewhere er other. Honest, it's the only thing I kin think of."

"Well, it hain't much of an idear," said Tar scornfully.

Willie broke in, saying excitedly, "Hey, look at the duck now, wouldja?"

They all looked. The drake was standing up on his big flat feet, apparently through for the day with his preening. He looked insolently down at his foes and shook himself. He thrust out first one wing, then the other, stretching them leisurely. Then he flapped both wings

PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT violently, as if to make sure they were in good working order.

"Looks like," said Tar, "he's already got his notion to go somewhere er other."

"Well, I cain't think of no way off hand to stop him," said the cop.

The muscovy walked slowly along the roof till he reached its very edge. There, majestically, he launched himself into the air, falling nearly twenty feet before his thrashing pinions took hold. Then he climbed with massive wingbeats above the level of the neighborhood roofs. He circled Tar Beach's back yard twice, rising higher and higher, then headed west and went lumbering out of sight with the grace of a threshing machine.

"Mebbe he's gone fer good," said the cop optimistically.

"Mebbe," said Tar.

"I done the best I could, anyhow," said the cop.

"Well, I sure thank yuh fer yer help," said Tar.

"I 'spect I better be gettin' on back, though,"

PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT said the cop. "So long, you kids. Tell yer mother I done the best I could."

"Yeh, we will," said the Farriers. They left, too. "Good-by, Mister Beach."

"'By, boys," said Tar absently. He went over and picked up his two dead frying hens.

Back at the station, the chief asked the patrolman about reports coming in of much shooting in the neighborhood where the patrolman had been sent to catch the duck.

"That must of been me," said the cop. "I fired a time er two."

"Didja git him?" asked the chief.

"Nope, but I sure scared hell out of him."

Three days after the policeman's efforts, Mrs. Farrier was sitting on her front porch, sewing and rocking. A big green farm wagon stopped in the street in front. From it, after he twisted the reins around the brake handle, alighted a large, genial-looking man in overalls. He came to the porch step and took off his hat. "Are you Miz Farrier?" he asked politely.

"Yes."

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"Well, I'm Mister Renfro; I live out towards Muddy Creek a ways."

"Yes?"

"Well, some time back, I think it was your two boys who bought a duck offen me at the market."

"Oh, dear! Now what's happened?"

"Why, nothing much. 'Cept this morning I thought I seen that duck I sold your kids back in with my others, and I was wondering if he could of got away from yuh or something. If he did, I'll be more'n glad to return him."

"No! No!" cried Mrs. Farrier. "It's not our duck. There's been a mistake. We don't want any ducks. We don't like ducks."

"Well, but m'am, if he's yourn, looks like you'd want him back."

"No!" said Mrs. Farrier. "We don't want him. Please don't bring any ducks around here. Please!"

"Well . . . okay," said Mr. Renfro. "I jest thought I'd ask, on account of being in town today. Mebbe I'm a duck to the good."

He left somewhat bewildered.

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Mrs. Farrier fiddled around uncertainly for a while and then decided that the occasion demanded some unusual manifestation in the way of celebrating. She made a hurried trip to town and then busied herself in the kitchen. When Tom and Willie came trooping in, asking about supper, they were startled to the soles of their shoes to see ice cream and cake on the table.



## *Chapter Four*

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THE EPISODE OF the snapping turtles was the high point of the following summer. On the whole it was one of the happier episodes as concerned the neighborhood and the Farrier boys' pets; compared with the muscovy drake and his evil saga, it was downright idyllic.

As soon as summer had come and school was out and vacation was on, Mrs. Farrier recognized from her sons' actions and words that it was only a question of time till more pets

PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT would be brought in. They talked constantly of becoming hunters and trappers when they grew up, and they speculated on the possibility of being able to capture wild life within walking distance of their own home. Mrs. Farrier thought that here would be a fine time to "divert" them again, as the Reverend Mr. Jackson had suggested the previous summer. But the boys showed no interest whatever in the things she thought up by way of diversion, and she herself remembered all too well the muscovy and the diversion he had provided. So it was not long at all till Tom and Willie took up the chase over the nearby fields and valleys in search of the wild things which gave zest to their days, and which were only to be found beyond the end of the pavement. And, each being a year older, they ranged much farther.

They very quickly discovered Jackson's Branch, a tiny streamlet which the city engineers had utilized as a handy and natural outlet for the city's sewage system—those being the days before incinerators were the hallmarks of municipal betterment. Jackson's Branch com-

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menced at the edge of town and followed a meandering course to a point where another little streamlet joined it and both thereupon assumed the more dignified name of Brushy Creek. To the Farrier boys, the trait which distinguished Jackson's Branch from Brushy Creek was the fact that they could leap across the branch practically anywhere the fancy took them, but had to follow along Brushy until a riffle or narrows appeared, in order to make a crossing.

Brushy pursued a humdrum course till it met Muddy Creek, which it joined. Muddy ran between cornfields and wheatfields till it joined Blackwater. Blackwater—almost large enough to be called a river—eventually poured into the Missouri. The Missouri, as everyone knows, combines with the Mississippi, and the Mississippi empties into the Gulf. And so it was that the greasy waters in the hinterlands of Missouri where the Farrier boys first dabbled their small bare feet finally reached and became part of the Caribbean Sea.

As to Jackson's Branch itself, the only note-



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worthy feature of its entire length and breadth was the fact that, due to the quantities of sewage which were emptied into it every day from the town's mains, it was capable of supporting, and did very assuredly support, an unbelievable number of common snapping turtles. Several thousand or more must have lived in its gummy, soupy waters, and they had no natural enemies. For Jackson's Branch was characterized, because of its town-conferred burden, by a highly pestiferous odor, and men, who might have slaughtered the turtles, walked wide of the noxious little stream.

The Farrier boys chanced upon it late one afternoon when they were cutting across fields new to them in order to arrive home more speedily. The lethal stench of the branch bade them keep their distance, but their natural curiosity in strange waterways bade them examine it at close range; and, as always, their natural curiosity triumphed.

Almost the first thing they saw was a heap of débris, left by some former flood, alongside and partly jutting over the branch itself. And

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on the heap, sunning themselves, lounged five or six snapping turtles of varying degrees of largeness. The Farriers, be it remembered, had never so much as seen a single, solitary snapper before; that first crowded vision of *Chelydra serpentina* was one of the major moments of their lives.

One after another, the snappers, aware of intruders, waddled off the heap and toppled into the water where they swam promptly to the bottom and stirred up hectic froths of bubbles and gooey muck. One small fellow returned tantalizingly to the surface and thrust out his head for another cursory stare at the boys, then withdrew it and sank to the bottom. That ended the Farriers' introduction to the snapping turtles of Jackson's Branch.

For a while neither said anything. It was so incredible and fantastic that within a fifteen-minute walk of their own back yard there should exist a host of such extraordinary reptiles. They went home slowly, communicating to each other with excited mutters.

“. . . that big un! Gosh!”

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“ . . . nine or ten of 'em!”

“Snappers—they musta been.”

“Gosh, they got off that pile quick!”

“ . . . big un musta been two foot acrost!”

And, agog and aglow with the magnificence of their discovery, they were, at the same time, chagrined they had not made it sooner. Also, they were profoundly jealous of their secret; they vowed time and again never to divulge it to anyone. They had pried into a weird and esoteric world; they felt as trusted initiates of the great mother Nature.

“We'll catch us one,” said Willie determinedly.

“We'll catch a whole mess of 'em!” said Tom. “We can get 'em easy.”

“But we won't tell nobody whur we get 'em, or ever'body'll go out after 'em.”

“By golly! All them things so close to town!”

The discovery occurred on Friday; they returned to the branch the next day avid and anxious, but the results were disappointing. They followed all the way to Brushy Creek, yet

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saw only one turtle. It was a medium-sized one sitting on a mud bank; it plunged into the water almost before they saw what it was.

Next day, being the Sabbath, they donned their best and went to Sunday school. They ate the customary lavish Sunday dinner and read the funny papers. Soon, though, they became restive, and Willie could stand the call no longer.

"Mamma, can't we go out to Jackson's Branch just for a little bit?"

Mrs. Farrier was expecting company that afternoon; it might not be a bad idea, she considered, to have the boys out of the way for a while.

She said, "Yes, you may. But, now, be very careful of your clothes. They're the best things you've got, and I want you both to look nice for supper."

"We'll be awful careful, mamma."

The branch that Sabbath afternoon wound somnolently between its banks of Jimson weeds and buckbrush. The water was grayish and thick; in spots it stood stagnant. In those spots

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a heavy green scum with black streaks in it had formed; now and then fat sewer bubbles broke through the patches to burst with little pops.

For a long while the Farriers saw no turtles. They followed the branch with anxious eyes, concealing their mounting disappointment by assuring each other that around the next bend, certainly on the next débris heap, turtles would be.

And then Tom really did see one—a muddy brown one about six inches across the carapace. The turtle was meditating on a steep clay bank, a foot or so above the water, directly beneath where the boys stood. Tom whispered warningly and pointed down at it.

The desire to catch one of the snappers had burned for three days now with a steady glow in Willie Farrier's mind. As soon as he saw this one, he threw caution to the winds—as they used to phrase it in Missouri—and launched himself down the bank, intent on seizing a turtle at last.

Even when they are dry and flaky, steep clay banks are slippery, and, unless there is a log

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or hummock at their bottoms, they are difficult places on which, once started, to halt. Willie didn't halt. He slid feet first down the brown clay bank, kicked the turtle into the water with a madly scraping left foot, and followed right after the reptile to come up all standing and waist deep in the foul branch of sewage.

But his tears, if any, were only for the escape of the snapper. He gave no thought to his Sunday-best clothes.

"Whur'd he go?" he yelled at Tom. "Gosh, I almost had him! Whur'd he go? Maybe I can get him yet!"

Tom, no less excited, pointed out the tell-tale trail of bubbles the turtle was stirring up as it swam and burrowed along the branch's bottom.

"There he is! There he is! Feel fer him with yer feet! Getcha a stick er something and poke him up to the top. See them bubbles behind yuh? That's him!"

Willie saw and gave chase. But it was too late; the turtle found refuge in a hole under the overhanging edge of the opposite bank.

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Willie gave up. He waded back to his own side and climbed out up the clay bank with Tom's aid.

"Gee whiz!" cried Tom, "you almost had yer hands on him! Why didn't yuh grab quicker 'stead uh kicking him in the way yuh done? He would of set still whur he was if you hadn't of kicked him."

"Yeh, but the crazy bank was too doggone slick," said Willie in self-defense. "I couldn't do nothing but slide around. I durn near had him at that, though. I betcha I get him the next time."

"Do yuh s'pose," asked Tom, "if we hang around a while and keep real quiet, he'll come back?"

"He might," said Willie. "Let's try it; we got lotsa time."

They sat down amid the Jimson weeds and waited. They waited so long that Willie's clothes dried out completely—stiff and filthy and stinking. But the turtle never reappeared. Jackson's Branch moped along with an occasional irritating gurgle; and that was all.

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"Well," said Willie defeatedly, "I guess he ain't ever coming back; I guess we better beat it."

And they started home.

They reached the town's very edge, where the pavement began, and also where Jackson's Branch, as such, had its birth. This was the mouth of a four-foot sewer pipe out of which drizzled the waste of the city. A wide and gooey sandbar had been built up several yards from the mouth of the pipe; in between sandbar and pipe mouth was a scummy pool.

The boys stopped there for a final look. And, as they stood there looking, a snapping turtle with a shell a foot wide crawled out of the scummy pool and crawled up on the sandbar.

Tom gave an instantaneous leap. He lit in the middle of the sandbar and sank into it beyond his knees. But, glory of glories, he seized the big reptile by the tail as it attempted to regain the water, and the Farrier boys had caught their first common snapping turtle.

The actual capture, of course, was far less simple than the telling thereof. When a small-



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for-his-age, nine-year-old boy stands hip deep in sloppy sand and attempts to hold onto and keep from being bitten by a fourteen-pound snapping turtle, the situation, in a sense, is one fraught with desperation.

Snapping turtles are very compact jobs. Their legs are decidedly strong and are armed with sturdy claws. Their tails are long enough to make good handles, but taper abruptly and are fitted with a series of sharp ridges something of the pattern of that which allegedly adorns a dragon's back; they make poor things, when slippery, to hold to. Also, when one does have a snapping turtle by the tail, the turtle can and does switch his tail violently from side to side, lacerating one's hand against the saw-like rear edges of his shell. At the same time, he is liable to curl his hind feet rearward and upward and have at the offending hand with his claws. Furthermore, he is capable of throwing his head halfway to either side of him or halfway straight back over his shell, his jaws clicking shut when his stretching neck achieves its limit. His forefeet, of course, during these

PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT offensive maneuvers, are constantly endeavoring to find foothold and scratch him to freedom. All in all, a fresh-caught snapping turtle promptly becomes a muddy and furious maelstrom of wrath and danger, and, as a plaything, is not to be recommended.

Willie noted the straits Tom was in and waded out alongside him in the sandbar to aid and assist.

"Turn him over on his back," directed Willie. "Then he'll be helpless and cain't struggle around so much."

Tom gave a wrench at the tail, and over went the turtle. Immediately, however, the reptile shot out his head and, with a looping twist of his neck, prised himself back to his original right-side-upness. By that unlooked for strategy, he also prised himself loose from Tom's slippery hands. He started frantically for freedom.

But Willie grabbed and got his tail again and yanked him back. "I guess it ain't no good to turn him over," he admitted. "We gotta get him up on dry land this way."

By relays, then, they worked themselves and

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the snapper out of the sandbar and onto firm soil. When they got there, they were mud from head to foot, and almost exhausted, but they had the turtle where he could not readily escape; and even he, after his terrific struggles, was content to stay morosely, if ominously, quiet, for the time being.

“What’ll we do with him?” asked Tom.

“Why, we’ll take him home, of course,” said Willie, as if there had never been any question about it. “You stay here and watch him while I get something to carry him in.”

Willie found a torn gunny sack hanging on a gate. He hooked the holes in it together with pieces of barbed wire twisted from the fence. The boys eased their turtle cautiously into the reconditioned sack—for he was still far from tractable—and started home.

When they arrived, their mother was sitting on the front porch with her callers—Mrs. Barsdel and her sister-in-law, Mrs. Howard. From afar she had seen them coming up the street. She had thought, even at that distance, that

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something was wrong with their garb, but only a close view could reveal the full horror. All that Mrs. Farrier was able to say when her sons hove into the front yard was, "Just look at them!"

The boys, still in a seventh state of higher delight, merely chirped, "'Lo, mamma. 'Lo, Miz Howard. 'Lo, Miz Barsdel," and marched on around to the back yard where they filled their mother's washtub and dumped the turtle into it.

Mrs. Farrier said despairingly to her callers, "Did you ever see anything more disreputable-looking in all your born days? At noon they were spic and span. I just don't see how they do it."

Mrs. Barsdel said suspiciously, "They seemed to be carrying a sort of sack."

"Goodness, that's right!" cried Mrs. Farrier. "They've caught something again. I should have known from the looks on their faces. Excuse me a minute, please. I better find out what it is right away. If it's a duck . . ." And she hurried to the back yard. "Willie! Tom!"

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“Ooooh, mamma, c’mere!” they yelped.  
“C’mere and look, quick!”

Mrs. Farrier went quickly and looked, and backed away even more quickly, repelled.  
“Ugh!”

The snapper was swimming round and round the bottom of the tub, his foot-scratching quite audible as he strove to dig through the galvanized iron even as he had always been able to dig through the muck of Jackson’s Branch and hide himself at the bottom. This infuriated swimming in the clean, fresh water of the tub had had the effect of washing him free of the filth which had garnished him during his days in the branch, and, when Mrs. Farrier looked at him, he was a much handsomer turtle than he was at the time of his capture. Nevertheless, she still saw nothing whatever to commend about him, and her disgust with him plus her distress over the befoulment of her sons’ raiment reduced her quickly and effectively to a mood of deep dismay.

“I’m just sick!” she said. “Willie, how could you do such a thing? You know I begged you

PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT to keep your clothes clean. And now look at you! And you bring this horrid thing home and put it in the tub that I have to do the washing in tomorrow! Some day you boys are going to drive me stark, raving mad. Just see if you don't!"

"Why, heck, mamma, he can't hurt the tub a bit," said Willie.

And Tom said, "Why, mamma, I betcha we're the only boys in town what ever caught a big turtle like this un."

"I don't care if you're the only boys in the world who caught the nasty thing!" said their mother. "I'm not a bit proud of either of you. I might be proud if you'd ever do something real nice, but all you ever do is get your nice clothes filthy dirty and bring home horrible things that make trouble for me."

"Why, mamma, he can't hurt nothing," protested Willie. "Gosh, he can't even get out of the tub. He can't fly like the duck did, can he? How's he gonna make trouble for yuh? Heck, he can't even make no noise."

"But he's not going to stay in that tub," said

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Mrs. Farrier. "You get him out of there this minute. Where did you catch him?"

"In Jackson's Branch."

"Well, you take him straight back there and leave him. I won't have him here at all."

Both boys were on the verge of weeping. Helen Farrier didn't understand it then, but that common snapping turtle was as prized by them as the Grail by Galahad. It summed up in its awkward, strange ugliness the gradually increasing call Nature was exerting upon them. It represented a difficult goal and a high achievement for them. The possession of the turtle, the privilege of being able to capture it, gave them pride and self-esteem, set them apart in their own minds from the other, less favored boys of the town.

They would not take him back. They could not. They tried to explain to their mother why.

She listened to their sorrowings and protestations and lamentations for not too long, then wearily gave in.

"All right, then, keep him! But you'll have

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to find some other place than the washtub;  
that's final!"

At once they cheered up. "Why, gee, mamma, we wasn't gonna leave him in the old tub. We just put him in there to get clean in. We'll put him in the woodshed, mamma; that'll be a swell place for him."

"Why, he'll die out of water."

"Naw, he won't either, mamma. Heck, ever' time you see 'em at Jackson's Branch, they're setting out on bank. They don't really need very much water at all."

"Well, you put him in the woodshed and lock the door, and then you get yourselves cleaned up. And, remember, I'm still very much displeased with both of you."

She went back to her guests, who queried her at once, "What did they have, Helen? We could hear you scolding them clear out here."

"They had a turtle," said Mrs. Farrier. "But, please, let's talk about the weather."

Tom and Willie sunk a large, bad-order dishpan, which their mother turned over to them,



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level with the dirt floor of the woodshed and filled it with water on the theory the snapper would use it as his bath and drinking water combined. However, he evidenced a distinct disregard for it from the beginning, and the only times he ever was in it was when the boys picked him up bodily and shoved him in. Most of his hours he spent in search of freedom from the woodshed. A great and determined excavator, he dug holes wherever he could stir the earth, particularly around the sides of the shed. The shed itself had been erected on the foundations of an old cellar which had been filled in, and the old masonry walls went down in the ground five feet or more, a depth to which he could not tunnel. But he could hide himself very effectively, and the boys' first task every morning was to poke about in the different holes till they found the one their turtle currently hid in, then exhume him and pop him into his bath.

All in all, he was not a very satisfactory pet. He never displayed any tendency to become tame and gentle, and whenever they were near

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him they had to be on constant guard against his wickedly snapping mandibles.

“For the life of me,” said Mrs. Farrier, “I can’t see what you like about him. Of all the awful pets!”

“Well, mamma, we don’t exactly like him,” said Willie. “We don’t ever wanta pet him or nothing. But he’s so doggone *different*, don’tcha see? That’s what we like about him. He ain’t like a crazy old cat that ever’body’s got.”

“No,” said Mrs. Farrier, “he certainly isn’t. But why can’t you be satisfied with nice things . . . like rabbits?”

“Oh, gosh, mamma, don’tcha see? We don’t like stuff that people give yuh like rabbits and cats and dogs. We like things that yuh gotta catch. Things that yuh gotta go out and hunt for. Things that’s sort of dangerous. Why, we’re still scared of this turtle. That’s why we like him. But we wouldn’t be scared of any old cat or rabbit.”

And that was as far as Willie could go in his analysis of his and Tom’s feelings about the matter. They both knew that when they

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sat watching the turtle they experienced quite different emotions from when, for instance, they watched Lulu, the Multin rabbit. But it was hard to put the difference in words.

As Willie said, they had no particular affection for the turtle. Rather, they entertained a formless, very, very hazy horror. It was not in the least a troublesome horror; instead, it was a pleasurable thing. Perhaps it was that the descendants of the cavemen looked upon the descendant of the giant reptiles and were no longer afraid, even though a remembrance of former, terrible fear still was with them. Life, in its queer turnings and reshapings, had granted them a definite and not to be questioned mastery; to the reptile it had granted only a mere existence, humble and secretive.

Or, it might have been merely because the turtle *was* a reptile, and the first reptile they had ever been able to subject to close scrutiny. Certainly, there dwells in reptiles a vast mysteriousness, inherent with their legend and their fantastic morphology, that can never be

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matched by a warm-blooded, fur-covered mam-  
mal.

In a short while, they caught more turtles and brought them home to the woodshed. The more they caught, the easier the discovery and capture became. They began to recognize the signs which proclaimed turtles to be near about, and the localities which the turtles favored or the ones they avoided. They found, by the simple experiment of wading along Jackson's Branch and thrusting their hands under the overhanging edges of the weed-matted sides, that the turtles very often hid in such places. They found a likely place for turtles to be any stretch of soft, warm mud. There the snappers would bury themselves and breathe by thrusting out only the tiniest tip of a nose—a job, incidentally, for which the nose of a snapper seems particularly well-designed. Of course, there is no computing a chelonian's size from the size of his nose holes, so when the capture was made its first proceedings were character-

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ized by much caution till enough of the turtle  
was uncovered to reveal its bulk.

Little snappers—those less than six inches  
across the carapace—required no great measures  
of safety in handling. But big turtles—and some  
in the branch weighed forty pounds—demanded  
as nice maneuvering as a live wire or a hot  
potato. The little snappers were apt to be slug-  
gish and lethargic, and subsided quickly after  
being caught; but the big fellows became wroth  
as the idea that they were prisoners sunk in,  
and their struggles became more and more in-  
tense.

Large or small, they all abounded in treach-  
ery, being consummate masters of the art of  
lying quiet and playing 'possum till they saw  
what they took to be an opportunity to snap  
their bills on a bare hand or foot. One of the  
first things the Farriers discovered in their  
turtle-hunting days was the fallacy in the hoar  
adage: "A turtle never lets go until it thun-  
ders." They had caught a large, vicious, and  
unruly specimen who considered his best de-  
fense lay in a strong, unremittent attack, and

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who snapped ferociously and accurately at them whenever they approached too close to where he hassled on the bank where they had flung him.

Tom, recalling the adage, suggested they give him a stick to bite; if he did hold on till it thundered, they were safe enough from his jaws for the time being in their immediate project of loading him into a gunny sack, for there was no indication whatever of immediate thunder in the heavens.

So Willie thrust a stick at the snapper, and the snapper seized it with an ardor that all but wrenched it from Willie's hands. Sure enough, he retained his jaw grip upon it, even to the point of allowing himself to be lifted from the ground with the stick and swung around in circles.

"I guess he's got a good enough hold," decided Willie. "I'll hold open the sack, and you dump him in."

And Willie held the sack, and Tom gingerly took the snapper by the rear of his carapace and lifted him from the ground.

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The snapper spat out the stick and swung his head murderously at Tom's leg. His bill closed on the inside seam of Tom's pants, cutting through the seam so that the hook on the end of his beak gouged out a chunk of Tom's inner thigh. With a loud yell, Tom dropped the turtle, but this time the brute did hang on—to Tom's pants—and he swung there between Tom's legs, getting in some good scratches with all four feet at the same time.

Willie jerked him loose by the tail, the snapper's jaws ripping out a long piece of pants during the jerk. In the confusion that followed, the turtle waddled hastily back to the branch and escaped.

The trouble was that neither boy had ever been bitten by a turtle before, and neither was at all convinced that the turtles in the branch were not poisonous. Tom's leg streamed blood. Willie tied the wound as tightly as he could with his handkerchief. The tightness had a tourniquet effect; the blood soon clotted and the bleeding stopped.

But Willie kept saying uneasily: "Do yuh

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feel all right? It ain't swelling none; I don't think it's poisoned."

"It hurts awful," said Tom. "I betcha it is poisoned."

"Naw, it can't be," Willie said finally. "Look, if it'd been poison, you'd be dead already 'cause poison works so fast. Why, it don't take a man no time at all to die when he's been snake-bit real good 'cause the poison works so fast. So you ain't been poison-bit or you'd be dead now."

Tom was still worried and dubious, but, by the time they reached home, the pain of what was really quite a minor bite had subsided, and he was pretty well convinced the turtle's jaws had harbored no venom.

"Anyhow, we better not tell mamma," Willie decided, "'cause you know how much she always worries over stuff she don't know nothing about."

"Yeh, we better not," agreed Tom, "or she might get sore and not let us go out no more."

So they didn't tell her, and nothing came of the bite, and in a short while both of them forgot it.



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At the end of the month, the boys had sixteen snapping turtles in the woodshed. Mrs. Farrier knew that they had captured more from time to time, but the first had established the precedent, and she said no more about it. One Sunday afternoon, however, her sons decided to parade all their snappers in the back yard at once. It was then that the difficulties started.

Tar Beach lived down the street; across the alley lived the Wilsons. Mrs. Barsdel lived on the next block, and the Multins lived down the other side of Tar. But right next door to the Farriers lived Miss Kathy Oldwage; she was the most important of all, for she owned the Farrier house and collected the rent from Helen Farrier.

For some unexplainable reason, theretofore the Farriers had existed side-by-side with Miss Kathy in the utmost of amity. It was unexplainable because Miss Kathy was a maiden lady, and she was packed full of those things which in these latter years have become known as allergies, inhibitions, and phobias. Of course, she stayed within doors most of the time and never

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took much note of what went on outside; it is doubtful if she even knew that Tom and Willie had once upon a time owned a white muscovy drake. Sometimes an entire month would pass before Mrs. Farrier saw her; and then it was only when she went tapping at Miss Kathy's front door with the hard-accumulated rent.

Miss Kathy left the world strictly alone; and the world, in return, rarely went out of its way to bother her. Never, in all her life, had Miss Kathy seen a turtle.

But it was her fate that Sunday afternoon to be deep in some unusual puttering job in her back yard, to hear the Farrier boys admonishing one another, and to peep over the fence between her home and theirs and see sixteen turtles all at once, wandering about haphazardly, creeping and crawling. Tom and Willie were ankle-deep among them, herding them about with sticks, separating them if they started to fight.

To Miss Kathy, anything that crawled was a horror and an abomination and a foul thing under the sun; and here were sixteen snapping

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turtles all crawling at once as she had never seen anything crawl before. Customarily, when faced with something of a startling nature, she emitted little screams. But this time Miss Kathy did not scream. She choked and she blanched. She was still choking and blanching even after she had wobbled indoors, latched the door, and fallen on her old plush couch. Her spell lasted nearly an hour; then she felt strong enough to brew and drink some tea. After that she felt strong enough to telephone Mrs. Farrier.

Mrs. Farrier received the call with a sort of resignation. And, yet, it was by far the most serious call Mrs. Farrier had ever received about her sons and their pets. For Miss Kathy was very determined, and Miss Kathy came directly to the point. Tom and Willie must get rid of those turtles, or else the Farriers would have to move elsewhere. Miss Kathy valued Mrs. Farrier as a tenant and prized her as a friend, but flesh and blood would stand only so much, and the flesh and blood of Miss Kathy would not stand turtles. There was no alterna-

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tive: either the turtles went or the Farriers did,  
and the sooner the better.

"Very well, Miss Kathy," said Mrs. Farrier.  
And she sat down to think the situation over.

She was in a combative mood that afternoon;  
her first notion was to find another house and  
move the very next morning. Certainly, she  
told herself, her sons had rights just as much as  
other people did, and what they did in the  
back yard was their own business. Furthermore,  
she could not understand Miss Kathy carrying  
on so about the silly turtles; but the reason she  
couldn't was because her sons had recently be-  
gun to evangelize her with their theories of na-  
ture and wild things, and Helen Farrier now  
looked at turtles with a measure of tolerance,  
and not at all as did Miss Kathy.

But then the money question obtruded itself.  
For a widow with two sons and only a tiny in-  
come, Helen Farrier had managed very well,  
but she never had any extra money from month  
to month; and with all the scrimping in the  
world, some of the months of the year were  
lean ones. She thought and thought and

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thought, but even before she started thinking she knew with certitude she couldn't move unless she borrowed money to do it with. And that was out. She would not borrow money.

She thought then of arguing further with Miss Kathy, but that thought, too, came to nothing because she knew Miss Kathy wouldn't relent—Miss Kathy was not the relenting kind.

Nothing was left except to get rid of the turtles. And here an insuperable object in the shape of her sons presented itself. Miss Kathy's annoyance would be as fiddlesticks to them. Helen Farrier, in fact, could already hear them saying, "Well, mamma, if she don't like the doggone things, she don't hafta look at 'em, does she? Nobody told her tuh stick her doggone head over our fence in the first place, did they? 'Tain't none of her doggone business, anyhow, is it?"

And she knew that because she secretly agreed with their logic she would probably find herself saying over and again, "You must get rid of them, you must get rid of them, you must

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get rid of them," and saying it futilely because she could think of nothing else.

And yet the turtles must go.

But, obviously, she herself was incapable of taking them away. She could not, she said to herself fervently, go in the woodshed, sack up the sixteen turtles, take them to Jackson's Branch, and free them. She was a very capable woman, but she could not do that.

And yet that was exactly what must be done—the problem now became beautifully clear—and the boys must be beguiled into thinking the turtles had escaped of their own accord or else that someone had stolen them. Otherwise, there never would be any peace again.

But how to manage all that? Well . . . An accomplice was needed! In a great light, Mrs. Farrier now saw what was necessary. She must prevail upon someone to go into the woodshed for her and take the turtles away. Simple enough.

But she knew no one to ask. "Heavens!" she said. "The more I think the worse it gets." She shook her head and went methodically to the

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kitchen to prepare supper, all the while mulling the question over in her mind.

And, during supper, Tom, very surprisingly, solved the problem for her. He was eating his rice fritters and maple syrup when he looked up abruptly at Willie and said, "Hey, you know what old Sam Wilgus said to me yesterday?" Sam Wilgus was the colored man who collected garbage in the neighborhood for his hogs.

"What'd he say?" asked Willie.

"He said if he had all them turtles like we got, he'd eat the things. Can yuh 'magine anybody wanting to eat one of them doggone old snapping turtles?"

"Tommy-boy," said his mother, "after supper when we're sitting on the front porch, you listen real carefully for the ice-cream cone man, and, when he comes by, I'll get you and Willie each one."

When Sam Wilgus drew up at the back fence next morning with his rattlety-bang old wagon and its equipment of battered washtubs wherein he stored his garbage collections, Mrs.

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Farrier met him there and engaged him in earnest conversation.

"Sam," she said, "would you like to make a dollar doing a little work for me?"

"Well, ah dunno, Miz Fa'yuh," said Sam doubtfully. "Ah been down in de back heah lately, an' ah jes' cain't do no right hahd wuk no mo'."

"Oh, but this isn't hard at all," Mrs. Farrier assured him. "This is the kind of work you'll enjoy."

"Miz Fa'yuh," said Sam seriously, "ah ain't nevah enjoyed no wuk fo' as long as ah kin remembah, an' ah don' figgah tuh staht enjoyin' it none now."

"Listen," said Mrs. Farrier, "all I want you to do is take those turtles my boys have in the woodshed and dump them back in Jackson's Branch where they caught them. It won't take you twenty minutes, and I'll give you a dollar."

"Don' de boys want dem turkles no mo'?" asked Sam. "Dey 'peared mighty fond of 'em last ah seen."



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"Yes, but they're tired of them now. So you come back this afternoon and get them."

"Well, ah'm pow'ful busy dese days, Miz Fa'yuh."

"Nonsense!" said Mrs. Farrier. "Look. Here's twenty-five cents, Sam. You come back this afternoon at two-thirty and get the turtles, and I'll give you the other seventy-five cents. Remember, now, two-thirty; no sooner and no later."

"Well, ah'll do wot ah kin 'bout it, Miz Fa'yuh."

"You be here," said Mrs. Farrier.

After lunch she gave Willie and Tom each fifteen cents and sent them to the picture show.

They said, "Yeh, but, heck, mamma, the pitcher ain't no good today."

She said, "Wally Reid is always good. Now, go on and go and stop making such a fuss about it."

So they went.

Two-thirty arrived, but not Sam Wilgus. Mrs. Farrier kept nervously looking out the

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kitchen window. At a quarter to three she saw him drive up. She rushed out.

"Now get them quickly," she said.

"Yes'm. Yes'm," replied Sam. "Jes' lemme git outta mah wagon fust."

She ushered him into the woodshed. Sam said, "Ah don' seem tuh see no turkles, Miz Fa'yuh."

Neither did she. Then she remembered her sons' endless conversations on the vagaries of snappers, and she cried, "Oh, heavens, they hide in all those holes! You'll have to dig them out. Here, let me show you."

She seized a garden hoe and hacked at a burrow along the wall. After moving a cubic foot or so of earth, she uncovered a slumbering snapper. "See? That's where they are."

"Sho' nuff," said Sam. "Who'd a-thunk it?"

He began to scratch around with a stick, uncovering turtles almost wherever he scratched.

"Lawdy-Lawd! How many of 'em is dey?" he asked, perspiring.

"Sixteen, the boys said, and make sure you

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"Sho' nuff?" said Sam. "But, ah reckon, Miz Fa'yuh, dat ah bettah put some ob dese babies in mah wagon fo' dey takes a notion tuh dig fresh holes."

"All right," said Mrs. Farrier enthusiastically. "You put them in the wagon, and I'll locate the others for you."

Sam fetched in one of his garbage tubs and put the turtles into it by the expedient of shoveling them up with a coal scoop which was leaning in a corner of the shed.

"The boys pick them up with their bare hands," boasted Mrs. Farrier, radiant with the success of her plannings.

"Yes'm, ah seen 'em," conceded Sam. "But ah figguh it's mo' safuh dis heah way."

Finally Sam announced all the turtles were loaded in the wagon.

"We'll have a final count and make sure," said Mrs. Farrier. She and Sam went to the wagon. Sam poked the turtles off one another

PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT with the scoop shovel while Mrs. Farrier counted.

"There's only fifteen!" she cried. "We've missed one. Come on back. We must look some more."

"Ah cud ob swo' ah counted sixteen," said the hot and tired Sam.

"No!" said Mrs. Farrier. "Come on back."

They went back and began to poke and dig some more. The floor of the woodshed looked as if treasure-hunters had been having at it, but they still failed to unearth the missing snapper.

"Dey jes' ain't no mo' ob dem heah," said Sam decisively. "Yo' boys jes' t'ought dey had sixteen. Fifteen is all dey is."

"No!" said Mrs. Farrier. "There's another somewhere. Keep looking."

Sam said grumblingly, "Well, wait till ah wrenches off mah hands a lil fust. Ah got grits all ovah 'em." He knelt down and sloshed his hands around in the washpan that served as the turtles' bath.

Sam sloshed only about two sloshes, then leaped away yelling.

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"Dah yis! Dah yis!"

"What?"

"De uddah turkle. De debbil's in de watuh. He uz all set tuh take a hunk outten me."

"Heavens, no wonder! That's the only place we didn't look. Well, get him in the wagon, and that will be that."

Sam scooped the snapper from the pan and transferred him to a tub on his cart.

As Mrs. Farrier paid him the seventy-five cents he still had coming, he said, "Doggone effen dat ain't de hahdes' dollah ah evah did make."

"Oh, piffle!" said Mrs. Farrier. "Now, you take these turtles away and get rid of them. And don't you tell a soul where you got them."

"Yes'm, ah'll git rid ob dem, sho' nuff." And Sam climbed in the seat and drove off.

Mrs. Farrier marched over to Miss Kathy Oldwage's front door and rang the bell firmly. Miss Kathy opened the door and greeted her reservedly.

"Miss Kathy, the turtles are all gone. I have

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just seen to it personally, and a man has taken them away."

Miss Kathy nodded a prim approval. "Well, I surely hope nothing will ever happen like this agin, Miz Farrier."

"So do I," said Mrs. Farrier.

"'Cause," added Miss Kathy, "you'll have to get out the next time."

Helen Farrier returned home, but her skull-duggery was still not done, for she now had in some manner to insure that her sons would not discover the loss of the turtles till the morrow. If they discovered their absence that afternoon, when only their mother had been at home, they might suspect all sorts of things. But next morning—well, she could plead ignorance then as well as they.

So, when the boys returned from the picture show, she fed them immediately and then commanded them to accompany her on a long walk to Forest Park. They were, of course, much surprised at this late afternoon activity on the part of their mother, who never before had evinced any enthusiasm for long walks, but she was so

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bright and gay and charming as she walked along with them that they forgot their surprise and fairly beamed under her gaze. When they returned home, she got out Kipling's *Jungle Book*, knowing how they never tired of it, and read them story after story of their beloved Mowgli. And, when nine-thirty came, they went to bed without a murmur.

Mrs. Farrier sat up a while longer. She was altogether worn out, but she wanted to enjoy a quiet time of triumph. For she had plotted the riddance of the snapping turtles, had carried that riddance through practically on her own shoulders, and had kept her sons distracted so that they had no thought of looking at them any more that day. Tomorrow, of course, they would rush out after breakfast, then rush back in again with the news the turtles were strayed or stolen. But tomorrow was still many hours off.

The particular heartless corporation which had the utility monopoly in the Farriers' town was a holding company which called itself the

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City Service Light and Transit Company. It had for general manager an enterprising young man of forty-six called Kenneth Kimes. He was all the time thinking up new promotion stunts to forward his company's interests in the town, and, in addition to his other duties, he belonged to the Chamber of Commerce, the Elks, the Masons, and the Y.M.C.A. He held office in all of them; it might be said he was a civic leader; it was said at his death that his place in the community was a hard one to fill.

Anyhow, he was puttering around in his own back yard for some reason when Sam Wilgus came driving down the alley with his load of turtles.

Kenneth Kimes saw Sam and hailed him to a halt, demanding to know why Sam had failed to empty the Kimes garbage container for the last ten days.

Sam said, "Well, suh, hit jes' don' look like ah got no time tuh do nothin' no mo'. Ah gits aroun' jes' as fas' as ah kin, but ah still don' nevah seem tuh git caught up. Tell y'all what, Mistuh Kimes, soon's ah dumps dis heah mess



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ob turkles, ah'll git at yo' gahbage, but ah jes' hain't got no room fo' it now."

"What d'yuh mean—mess of turtles?" asked Kimes.

"C'mere an' look," invited Sam.

So Kenneth Kimes looked into the tubs on Sam Wilgus's wagon and said, "Well, Jeesis Christ, whur'd you get all them things?"

"Ah 'quired 'em from a frien'," said Sam mysteriously and proudly.

"Whatcha gonna do with 'em?"

"Well, suh, ah aims tuh eat dem. Dey ain't nothin' like a good dinnah ob turkle meat."

"What? Eat them stinking things? Why, nigger, they'll poison yuh!"

"Aw, naw, dey won't. Turkle meat is ob de very fines'."

"What's it taste like?"

"Well, dat's de peculiah paht about hit. Turkle meat tastes like all de uddah differen' kinds ob meat what is. Sometimes one hunk ob turkle meat tastes jes' like chicken, but annudah hunk—offen de same turkle, min' yuh—tastes jes' like po'k. An' den agin de nex' hunk is liable tuh

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taste like roast bif. You don' nevah know what  
de nex' mouf-full ob turkle meat will taste like.  
But it all taste pow'ful good."

"Hmm," said Kenneth Kimes. "That's something I never heard before."

He looked at the snappers speculatively, but couldn't quite picture himself eating one, no matter how good it might taste. He noticed, idly, that dried mud on the back of one of the larger snappers had coiled itself into the semblance of the letter S.

"You got yer first initial on this one," pointed out Kimes.

"Sho' nuff," said Sam, looking. "Don' dat beat all." He chuckled. "Now, effen each turkle had him a diff'runt lettah on his shell, d'yuh reckon dey'd evah crawl aroun' till dey managed tuh spell out a hull word?"

"I doubt it," said Kimes, who was beginning to lose interest in the discussion. But suddenly his face gave a jerk. "Say! You've given me an idear! Wait a minute!" He counted rapidly on his fingers. "Six! What'll you take fer the six biggest ones yuh got here?"

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"Huh?" said Sam.

"I want to buy the six biggest ones. I've got a great idear. What'll you take for 'em? I'll give you two-bits apiece. That's a dollar and a half."

"Ah dunno," said Sam. "Turkles hain't so easy come by dese heah days."

"Oh, hell!" said Kimes. "It's the easiest dollar and a half you ever made in yer life, and you know it. Come on; unload me the six biggest ones. I'm in a hurry."

"Couldn' y'all make it an even dollah seventy-five?" suggested Sam.

"All right, all right," said the inspired utility manager. "Wait a minute till I fetch a box. Toss 'em in. Just the big ones, remember."

Sam lifted the turtles' hind ends with his whip handle and took them cautiously by the tails to drop them in the box. "Dah's de six," he said when done.

"Fine!" said Kimes, and paid him the dollar seventy-five. "Now, don't tell anyone where I got these," he admonished the colored man.

"Naw, suh, I won't," said Sam, and drove off thoughtfully.

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Kenneth Kimes tugged the box of snappers to his car and loaded it in. He drove straight to the City Service Light and Transit Company and directed his assistant there to clear the light bulbs and electric irons from the display window on Main Street.

The assistant did as he was told, then stood by for more orders. He could tell by Kimes's brisk, mysterious manner that another promotion project was afoot.

Kimes had dragged in his box of turtles and was admiring them. "Look," he said to his assistant, "I got me six whaling big snapping turtles here. I'm gonna paint the letters C, S, L, A, T, C on their backs—one letter on each turtle. Stands fer City Service Light And Transit Company—see? Then put the turtles in the winder there and let 'em mill around all they please. First winder-shopper who sees 'em all lined up so's the letters are in proper order gets a book of street-car tickets fer a prize. Promotional stunt—see? Brand new idear. We'll get the newspaper to write it up. Bring lots of folks around the place. Idear came to me like a flash

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all of a sudden like. Grab yuh a turtle now and hold him for me, and I'll do the painting. I reckon red ink'll stick to 'em. Gimme the paste brush and grab yuh a turtle."

"Look, Mister Kimes," said his assistant, "I ain't very hot about grabbin' one of them gawdam things. They look like they could bite a hell of a chunk out of yuh 'thout half tryin'."

"G'wan," said his superior. "They're perfectly tame. 'Sides, they're half asleep, too. Go ahead and grab one."

With utmost caution the assistant took up a somnolent snapper by the tip of the tail and laid it on the desk so that its head pointed at Kenneth Kimes.

"Good!" said Kimes. He dipped the paste brush in the red-ink bottle. "Let's see, now. Do I wanta paint them letters sideways er longways? Longways, I guess. Be easier to read that way."

He reached over the turtle's head with his brush and made a preliminary dab. The snapper shot out its head with snakelike swiftness; its hooked mandibles clicked through Kimes's

PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT shirt cuff and crunched brittlely on the German silver of his cuff links.

"Jeesis H. Christ!" said Kenneth Kimes, jumping about ten feet.

Said his assistant with deepest satisfaction, "I tole yuh them things was dangerous. Did he git to yer hide that time?"

"No, but he damn near did," said Kimes wrathfully. "What the hell d'yuh mean shoving the front end of him at me thataway? You oughtta have better sense."

"Thought that was the way yuh wanted him, Mister Kimes."

"Well, don't be so damn dumb after this. Turn him around. Get that ruler and hold his head down. I'll paint a letter on that sapsucker if it's the last thing I ever do."

The assistant armed himself with a ruler, and Kimes approached the snapper from a different angle. He scrawled a C on its shell this time without much difficulty. Then it was the next turtle's turn, and then the next, and so on until all six were lettered.

The twelve-inch ruler the assistant had em-

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ployed in warding off their snaps was no good as a ruler any more, due to the numerous gougings it had sustained, and the desktop cover of blotting paper was torn and riven where the snappers had scratched it loose with their claws. In addition to all that, there was red ink liberally sloshed around, but, at any rate, the job was done.

"Now, put 'em all in the winder," directed Kimes, "and print a sign to put in with 'em so's people'll know what it's all about. By George, it's a swell idear. Funny it never come to me sooner."

As Mrs. Farrier had prophesied to herself, her sons' first action on the morning following Sam Wilgus's taking away of the turtles was to go to the woodshed for the daily inspection of their pets. No pets, of course, were there. The boys came uncertainly back to their mother, bearing the awful announcement that the turtles had gotten away.

"The woodshed door was part open, mamma, and they must of got out that way. But we

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never left it open, mamma. We been doggone careful about it. Somebody must of been fooling around there while we was away. Betcha it was that doggone Mae Wilson; she's all time messing around where she ain't got no business. She went and turned our beetles loose once. Remember, mamma?"

"Oh, well," said Mrs. Farrier, profoundly relieved that her sons were putting such a reasonable construction on the turtles' disappearance, "I wouldn't worry about them very much. If they did wander off, they're probably back in Jackson's Branch by now. They never were very good pets, anyway. So let it be a lesson to you not to catch any more of them."

"Yeh, but, gosh, mamma, them doggone things is dangerous. They might bite somebody what didn't know how to handle 'em like we do. Why, they could durn near kill a little kid if they wanted to. Then we'd have some more trouble with the neighbors."

"Oh, but I don't really think they wandered off," Mrs. Farrier said. "I have a sort of hunch



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somebody stole them. People will steal anything, you know.”

“Yeh, but who could of stole ’em, mamma? The doggone turtles would of bit ’em. Heck, they’re worse’n bulldogs about biting all the time.”

“Well, anyway, they are gone, boys, and you mustn’t get any more of them. I haven’t told you this before, but Miss Kathy Oldwage was very upset about them and told me we would have to move if you didn’t get rid of them. So I’m glad it has happened this way; it makes it simpler all around.”

Willie and Tom looked at each other in amazement. “Why, gee whiz, mamma, why didn’t yuh tell us yuh wanted us to get rid of ’em? We was figgering on turning ’em loose tomorrow, anyhow, on account of they wouldn’t never eat nothing, and we was afraid maybe they’d die, and, besides, we was getting tired of ’em, too.”

“Willie Farrier, are you telling me the truth?”

“Why, sure, mamma. We was going to bor-

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row George Junior Multin's wagon and haul  
'em down to Jackson's Branch all in one load,  
wasn't we, Tom?"

"Uh huh," said Tom, "if George Junior  
could sneak the wagon away without his  
mother finding out he was going to loan it  
to us."

"Well," said Mrs. Farrier, "sometimes I am  
compelled to wonder about things."

"What, mamma?"

"Oh, nothing."

Three days later of that same week, Willie  
and Tom were walking through the business  
district of the town, staring into the windows as  
they passed. In the City Service Light and  
Transit Company they saw, much to their sur-  
prise, six large snapping turtles, each rather  
lugubriously labeled with a scraggly red capital  
letter. The turtles had been away from water  
for so long that they looked as dehydrated as  
cinders; they were pallid gray and brown in  
color, and the only hint of moisture upon their  
beings anywhere were ghastly dampish rings

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around their little sunken eyes, and those rings merely served to heighten the turtles' aspect of extreme aridity.

"By golly," said Tom, "they sure'n heck look like our doggone turtles."

"By golly," said Willie, "they are our turtles; look at the kink in the shell of the big un; remember it? These guys here stole 'em; that's what happened to 'em!"

"Yeh, but, gee!" said Tom. "The people what work here wouldn't steal doggone turtles, would they? What they got 'em all painted for? I betcha the turtles is sick, too."

"They look sick," agreed Willie, "and people'll steal anything, just like mamma said." Then he read the sign in the window. "Oh, my gosh! Y'er s'posed tuh watch till they all get lined up so's they spell something; then yuh win a prize. Gosh, if that ain't dumb! Them turtles won't no more get lined up than a bunch of chickens would."

"We better tell mamma right away that these people stole 'em," said Tom. "Then she can tell the police and have 'em arrested."

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"Well, we'll tell her," agreed Willie, "but I doubt if they get arrested. It's awful hard to get people in a big store arrested. They always got lawyers and things."

Inside the utility office, Kenneth Kimes's assistant was just then saying to his superior, "Yeh, sure it's a swell idear, but it ain't going over so big, Mister Kimes. The turtles won't do nothing but huddle up in one corner, no matter how much you prod 'em, and folks don't even bother to look at 'em no more. Seems to me it'd be lots better if we got 'em outta there 'fore they croak or something an' stink the place up. We oughtta put some uh them new floor lamps in the winder so's people could see 'em. An', furthermore, we ain't give away a single street-car ticket fer a prize yet. Seems tuh me, if yuh wanta give away tickets, you could dope out something a little easier."

"Well," said Kimes, who had had misgivings himself latterly, "if it'll make you any happier, why, go ahead and get rid of 'em. But I'll always claim it was a swell idear. I can't help it

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if the fool turtles did get dopey right away and wouldn't co-operate. Hell with the damn things."

The assistant sent the janitor out to look for Sam Wilgus. And when Sam was brought in the assistant said, "I got a little job of work for yuh, Sam."

"Sho' nuff?" said Sam.

"Yep. Got six whopping big mean snapping turtles in the front winder what we want you to cart away an' git rid of for us."

"I be dawggoned," said Sam.

"Yep. Give you four-bits for doin' the job. S'pose you kin handle it?"

"Yes, suh!" said Sam. "Ah kin really han'le it. Ah'm de turkle-haulin'est fellah in dis hull state, an' ah don' even know mah own strenth. Jes' gimme dat fo'-bits an' a long-han'led shovel an' plenty ob room. Dat's all ah needs."

"Well, don't go strainin' yerself, Sam."

After a while, the satisfied assistant revealed to Kenneth Kimes how he had gotten Sam Wilgus to dispose of the turtles for only fifty cents.

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"That's plenty cheap, I think, too, Mister Kimes," pointed out the assistant.

"Yeh, but what the hell did yuh wanta get Sam Wilgus for?" asked Kimes acidly.

"Well, he's got a wagon; he seemed the nach-eral guy to get. What's wrong with getting him?"

"Oh, nothing, I guess," admitted Kimes. "Only," he added mysteriously, "if those turtles don't wear out directly, that coon's gonna be a rich man."

While all that was happening, the Farrier boys had reached home and apprised their mother of their discovery of what they took to be the turtle thieves.

Mrs. Farrier, however, was not somehow in a sympathetic mood.

"Listen," she said, "I am worn out hearing about turtles. I forbid either of you to mention turtles to me again. I don't know where the light company got those turtles you saw, and I don't care. And I'm certainly not going to tell

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the police. Furthermore, I don't want to hear  
anything more about turtles ever."

"But, gosh, mamma . . ."

"No!"



## *Chapter Five*

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**E**LMER PAISLEY, OF whom there has been previously some slight mention, was the local paid secretary for the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. At the time when Willie and Tom were respectively thirteen and eleven, Elmer was a serious young man of thirty-nine. Just how he became connected with the Society is uncertain; in his instance, it is difficult to decide whether the job sought the man or the man sought the job. Anyhow, he had it and got



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paid a little for it and worked as hard at it as he was able. He was, indeed, a very good S.P.C.A. secretary, and the work he did was good. The trouble was that Elmer had a screw loose somewhere—one of those undefinable screws that seems invariably to be loose also in Y.M.C.A. secretaries, scoutmasters, playground directors, and leaders of young people's church unions—and the elders of the town, who should have given him more backing because he genuinely deserved it, merely scoffed at him among themselves and made use of him only as a sort of bogeyman with which to threaten their children.

"Don't pull your kitty's tail," a mother would warn her small daughter, "or I'll tell Elmer Paisley, and there's no telling what he'll do. Why, he's liable to cut off your ears!"

"Don't throw rocks at that fool dog!" a passer-by might growl at a little boy. "Don't you know Elmer Paisley'll hear of it and come down here and beat the britches off you?"

And daughter and boy would usually stop.

But when children tried disciplining the

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elders in the name of Elmer, the results were less salutary. Once upon a time George Multin, Jr., saw a teamster, whose wagon was stuck in the mud, flog his pair of mules till the mules became as wild things and nearly broke the harness. In much righteousness George, Jr., went up to the teamster and cried, "You better quit beatin' them mules thataway, er I'll tell Elmer Paisley aboutcha."

"Lissen, squirt," said the sweating teamster, "you kin tell that — — Elmer Paisley any — — thing you wanta, but right now you git to hell an' gone away from here er I'll light intuh yuh with this here — — whip!" And he kept right on flogging his mules till they experienced a change of heart and drew his wagon out of the mud.

Even Elmer himself, every now and then, would encounter difficulty and unpleasantness as he went about his tasks. He always rode a bicycle, and tied the right leg of his pants around his lower shin with string. One of his activities was to take an armload of posters depicting a merciful lady giving a bone to a dog

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or some similar theme and pedal all over town to nail them up in strategic places. One day he nailed one of the posters to a fence which was plainly marked *Post No Bills*.

The owner of the fence watched Elmer blithely hammer in tacks immediately under the word "No."

The owner said to his wife, "Now, kin you 'magine that?" And he went out to remonstrate with Elmer.

"Look, fellah," he said, "cain't you read or what?"

"Certainly I can read," said Elmer, driving home his last tack.

"Then," said the owner of the fence, "would you mind telling me just what the gawdam hell is the big idear of nailing that card right where it says for you not to?"

"Well," explained Elmer, "you see, this isn't a commercial card. The notice against posting bills, which is based on the original city ordinance, obviously refers to advertising or political matter and does not apply in this case."

"Oh, the hell it don't?" said the fence owner.

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He ripped the humane society poster from the fence, tore it into small bits, and threw them into the gutter.

He said to Elmer, "Now, you get on yer bicycle and get to hell away from here, 'fore I do you like I done that card. And don't you never let me catch you nailing stuff to my fence again."

Elmer pedaled back to his office and wrote out a long report of the affair. The board of directors read it and filed it, but never got around to doing anything about it.

The Farrier boys never ran afoul of Elmer till this particular summer when Willie was thirteen and Tom was eleven, the summer when they took under their wings, so to speak, a hatching of fine young screech owls. It seems strange, too, that this inevitable running-afoul should have been delayed as long as it was. For Elmer was always snooping around odd places on his bicycle, and the Farrier boys, since the days of the water beetles, had become notorious as seekers after and capturers of small game. Neighbors, moreover, had been wont to cry frantically

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more than once: "Well, why don't Elmer Paisley get after them boys? He's s'posed to watch after such things, isn't he?"

And, yet, it was not so strange, either, for the Farrier boys, had the neighbors taken the trouble to look into the matter a little more closely, would have appeared in their true light—obvious and sincere nature-lovers and not ever nature despoilers. Willie and Tom had a far deeper admiration and love for animals than had the whole humane society in toto, a love so profound and endless that it forever drove them to seek out more animals—new ones, strange ones, queer ones, beautiful ones—and to study them and feed them and endeavor to understand them. They weren't the kind of boys Elmer should have been after—the kind that tied tin cans to puppies' tails.

They were strange boys, certainly, and perhaps that is why they were never better understood, even by their own mother. But the truth of it was that it was almost as if they had two mothers—one who was Helen Farrier, a slim and pretty widow who fed them and clothed

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them; and the other who was Nature herself, a vast, amorphous thing, unnamed and undefined, the midwife of the world; and she offered them ecstasy.

Of course, in those days, the S.P.C.A. never troubled itself much with outlandish things such as turtles and frogs that came from places past where the pavement ended. And, in the instance of the muscovy drake, even the most critical of the neighbors agreed the shoe of cruelty was on the foot of the duck. So there had been no friction 'twixt Elmer and the Farriers. But the handwriting, as Holy Writ so neatly phrases it, was already on the wall, and certain coming events had already begun to cast their shadows.

A pair of little brick-red screech owls had met and loved and had a honeymoon. They had built a nest in a large woodpecker hole in an extra large dead tree. The hen had laid five eggs, and her master was very proud. After a decent length of time, both little owls rejoiced, for their wooings, worries, troubles, and labors

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were crowned and sanctified: five fine young  
owlets hatched.

The tree where the owl household was set up  
stood in a broad and weedy vacant lot almost at  
the edge of town. The lot was bordered by  
huge elm trees; the dead trunk that housed the  
owls stood nakedly all by itself in the lot's very  
center.

The Farrier boys used to cut across that lot  
sometimes on their way to or from Jackson's  
Branch. Once when they did so they saw a bright  
red-headed woodpecker slip into a hole high on  
the barkless trunk of the dead tree. Having noth-  
ing else more important to do at the moment,  
they each threw a rock at the hole to ascertain if  
they could make the redhead appear again.  
Unusual and unlooked for success was imme-  
diately theirs. For, as the rocks banged against  
the trunk, the woodpecker streaked out and flew  
away; and then—abracadabra—out of a larger  
hole just above the redhead's, two little red  
owls came, one after the other. Malappropriate  
to the legend which maintains owls can't see  
in the daytime, and, hence, act as foolish lost

PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT things, the little owls from the woodpecker hole saw at once where they wanted to go and promptly went there—the dark secrecy of the huge elm trees that bordered the lot.

“They’re screech owls,” said Willie. “I guess they live in that hole.”

“Gee, they sure are cute,” said Tom. “I bet they’d make good pets.”

“Yeh, but try and catch one,” said Willie.

And the boys went on their way, thinking no more of the matter for the nonce. Each time, however, they passed the dead tree after that, they always threw a rock at the owl hole to see if the owls were in; and they invariably were.

Finally, Willie had an idea.

“I betcha,” he said, “they got ’em a nest in there. Otherwise, they wouldn’t all time be sticking around.”

“Well, nacherally, they’d have a nest,” said Tom. “Birds all time got nests.”

“Yeh,” said Willie, “but what I was thinking is that maybe there’s some baby owls in there; the old ones’re sticking around to take care of ’em. You know how all them brown thrasher



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eggs in those nests out in the big hedge have hatched out. Looks like owl eggs would, too, by this time."

"Golly!" said Tom. "I wonder if they is?"

"Well, why don'tcha climb up and see?" suggested Willie. "I'll stay here and jigger for yuh if anybody comes along. Screech owls ought to make swell pets. I bet they get real tame."

"Yeh, but that'd be a heck of a tough climb," said Tom doubtfully.

"Nah!" said Willie with much scorn. "Why, you can shin up the lower part easy, and when you get to them old limbs and knobs it'll be just like climbing up a ladder. Go on—you can climb that old tree."

Tom was very proud of himself as a tree climber; he had never been stumped by a tree yet. But he was still doubtful. "What if the old owls attack me when they see me messing around their nest?"

"Aw, you can shoo 'em away with your hat. Go on, climb up and see if there ain't some little ones."

So Tom squared off with the nude tree trunk.

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It was far bigger around than his arms could reach, but excess diameter is never much hindrance to an expert shinner who depends more on the counterthrusts he can exert with his knees and ankles than on what he can encircle with his arms. Also, the bare bole was broken out with sundry protuberances and concavities which a hand could grasp or a toe could slip into, and Tom made good progress. And when, as Willie said, he reached the tier of branches, it was almost as simple as mounting a ladder. The owl hole was about forty feet from the ground. He climbed to it and clung resting there to a large snag that jutted out above it.

"G'wan, reach in!" directed Willie excitedly. "Quick, 'fore somebody comes along and sees yuh."

"Wait'll I get my breath," said Tom. But he was as excited as Willie, and, even as he said it, he shoved his hand cautiously in the hole. It was all scratchy and sawdusty feeling for a long way inside, and he had to push his arm in almost to the elbow. Then the passageway dropped down vertically very abruptly, and he

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had to turn his whole arm over so as to feel down in.

There, his fingertips encountered warmth and fuzziness, and a queer peeping filtered out the hole to his ears. His fingers searched about deeper; they grasped something downy and wiggly. He called in triumph to his brother: "I got one!"

"Well, pull him out!" cried Willie. "Let's see him!"

Tom carefully withdrew his arm with an owl in his hand, and, clinging there high in the dead tree by both legs and left hand, he had his first opportunity to inspect a very young screech owl.

It was smaller than a bantam chicken fresh-hatched, and of a beautiful butter-yellow color. It resembled a barnyard chick somewhat in its bodily proportion, but already it had the cruel hooked beak and the lethal claws of the Raptor.

"Oh, my gosh, it's the cutest thing I ever seen!" cried the delighted Tom.

"Toss it down," said Willie. "Lemme look at it."

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"Naw, it's too little," said Tom. "It ain't got no wing feathers, and it's liable to get hurt. I'll put it in my shirt."

"Has it got its eyes open yet?"

"Oh, sure. It's big enough to eat and everything."

"Well, get 'em all, then."

Tom fished about in the hole and drew out one owlet after another till he had all five. He put them down the open throat of his shirt as he extracted them from the nest, and they rode in the fold of his shirt as he descended to the ground.

He was somewhat lacerated from the climb but too jubilant to pay any attention to a few scratches.

"Golly, wait'll yuh see 'em!" he admonished Willie, and pulled the owlets out of his shirt.

Willie was equally entranced. The owlets squatted on the boys' palms and clamored remorselessly for food. They evinced no fear at all nor any alarm at their sudden kidnaping. They nibbled at the boys' fingers and at each

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other, in between times holding up gaping,  
pleading mouths.

"We better get 'em home and get 'em something to eat right away," said Willie. "Gee, look how tame they are."

The boys hurried home and bedded down the owlets in a box in the woodshed. Their mother being absent, they pilfered the ice box and cut off a small hunk of lean from a piece of stew beef there. The small hunk they shredded into tiny bits, and the tiny bits they fed to the five little owls.

The birds gulped down the food with zest. When their small craws were bulging, they flopped together in a corner of the box, yawned a time or two, and went to sleep.

"Doggone," said Willie, "I never saw nothing so tame in all my life. Why, they're ten times as tame as baby chickens."

"Yeh," said Tom, "and they eat so good they're bound to live all right."

And the boys were quietly happy all that day.

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But it wasn't long at all until trouble again reared its familiar head.

In a large and gloomy house, situated at the edge of the vacant lot where the owls' tree stood, there lived an old, nosy, and pestiferous widow woman by the name of Mrs. Jimmersan. She was a recluse, living in her huge old wreck of a house all alone, entertaining no visitors and visiting no acquaintances. Her back yard was a tangle of snarled, unpruned grapevines, and her front yard was a mess of weeds and casual papers deposited there by the wind.

Mrs. Jimmersan spent most of her time sitting in her upstairs bedroom, knitting, staring out the window, and mumbling to herself. She was a profound believer in patent medicines, ordering by mail all and every kind she could discover advertised in the various magazines and papers she read. (After she died, and her old house had been vacant for some months, the Farrier boys slipped into it one afternoon and prowled around, eerily expectant of a ghost on the theory the house by then should be haunted. They found no spook, but they did

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find a multitude of medicine bottles, vials, cans, and jars. All over the house the little receptacles lay—in every nook and in every cranny—boxes, barrels, and cartons of them, of different usages, dosages, smells, tastes and colors. The boys couldn't understand how in the world old Mrs. Jimmersan had ever died. "Looks like," said Willie, "she would of lived forever with all this here medicine to cure whatever ailed her.")

But that was later. On the day the Farriers acquired their screech owls Mrs. Jimmersan was hearty and hale. She was sitting as usual in her upstairs bedroom, knitting, staring out the window, and commenting to herself on the passers-by. She saw Tom and Willie and frowned. Almost every day for about two weeks she had seen those boys cutting across the vacant lot, either coming or going. She felt they could be up to no good. She frowned at them and clicked her lowers against her uppers and mumbled to herself that they were seekers after mischief.

She saw them halt beneath the tall dead tree. She saw them throw something up at the tree.

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Her eyesight was not strong enough to permit her to see the two adult owls flutter from the hole, but she deducted from the boys' cessation of stone-throwing and taking up of conference that they had achieved by that throwing some kind of result.

Then she saw one of them shin up the bare trunk, reach the lowest tier of branches, and ascend still higher. She saw him stop climbing high in the tree and go about the business of extracting the owlets, although, of course, she could not make out the details. Finally, she saw him descend to the ground, take the owlets from his shirt, and display them to the other boy. It was at this moment that it dawned on her what they had done: they had robbed a bird nest. Mrs. Jimmersan very nearly fell out of her rocker.

She had heard of boys doing such things, and she had felt upon the hearing that same horror and disbelief she had felt as a girl at tales of Indians scalping white settlers and murdering white babies. It had been an abstract horror,



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an aghastness tempered by the sheer distance from the scene of the atrocity.

And now she had seen it right under her own nose. It was incredible, but she had seen it.

Mrs. Jimmersan dedicated herself—as the saying so often goes—to action, her first dedication along such lines for nearly thirty-five years. She put on bonnet and shawl and made straight for the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. And when she got there she told all to Elmer Paisley.

“Hmmm,” said Elmer. He, too, regarded the robbing of a bird nest as a high crime. “What’d the boys look like, Miz Jimmersan?”

“They was little fellahs,” said Mrs. Jimmersan. “They had on blue shirts an’ yeller kaky pants. I never seen their faces real clost.”

“It must of been the Farrier boys,” said Elmer. “I’ve seen them crossing that vacant lot myself. Thank you very much for telling me this, Miz Jimmersan. I shall certainly speak to their mother the first thing in the morning.”

“Well, you make them put them pore bird

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aigs back, too, Mister Paisley. Honest, I'm jest sick about it. I never seen sech a wicked thing in all my born days."

"I pledge you my word," said Elmer, "that I will compel the boys to make restitution. Their action, as you say, was distinctly wicked."

Next morning a bicycle drew up in front of the Farrier home and Elmer Paisley dismounted from it, leaned it against the curb, walked up the sidewalk and rang the doorbell.

Just why Elmer had foreseen any necessity to arm himself for the interview will never be quite clear, but arm himself he had—with a long-handled spoon for a weapon, a big, healthy spoon of the soup-stirring variety. Elmer rang the doorbell firmly with the forefinger of his left hand; his right hand firmly clutched the spoon. All the while he was talking to Mrs. Farrier he punctuated his remarks by banging the bowl of the spoon into the palm of his hand, thereby making a slapping, plopping noise. Afterward Mrs. Farrier said, "And I thought I'd go as crazy as he is if he didn't

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stop pounding with that idiotic spoon. But he never did!"

Once in audience with Mrs. Farrier, Elmer came quickly to the point of his visit.

"As you know, Miz Farrier," he said, wagging the spoon in her face, "I am the secretary for the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals."

"Yes, Elmer, I know," said Mrs. Farrier.

"Well, now, Miz Farrier, it is my very painful duty to tell you that it has been reported to me only yesterday that your two boys was seen robbing a bird nest!"

"Why, that's utter nonsense!" cried Mrs. Farrier. "I don't believe it! My boys wouldn't dream of doing such a thing. Who reported it to you?"

"Miz Jimmersan. She identified them beyond any question of doubt."

"Fiddlesticks! Why, Elmer, she's such a crazy old thing she doesn't know what she sees half the time. She was dreaming or something."

"Well, now, Miz Farrier, I know from my

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own knowledge that your boys are all time catching turtles and such."

"Certainly they are! And what's wrong with that? You never say anything to grown men who hunt and fish, do you? You never heard of my boys killing or mistreating a frog or turtle, did you? I'll tell you this right now, Elmer Paisley, you couldn't find two boys anywhere who treat animals more kindly than Tom and Willie do!"

"I know, Miz Farrier. I know, and I ain't saying a word about that. But what I was getting at is that if they catch turtles and things they might go so far as to rob a bird nest. One thing leads to another, you know." And Elmer looked at her triumphantly, feeling that he had made a telling point.

"Well, I'll call the boys this very minute and ask them. I'm very indignant, Elmer, that you should hint at such a thing. I'll ask the boys, and that should settle it for once and all."

"Very well, Miz Farrier, call them," said Elmer. And he scratched the side of his head with his long-handled spoon, dislodging addi-

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tional flakes of dandruff which floated down to  
powder his shoulders.

Willie and Tom, summoned and appearing, looked at Elmer with deep suspicion. They felt trouble to be imminent. As soon as they came on the porch, Elmer stopped scratching his head with the spoon and began once more his remorseless palm-pounding.

"Here they are now. Ask them, Elmer," said Mrs. Farrier.

Elmer fixed the boys with stern eyes. "Did you fellahs rob a bird nest yesterday?" he demanded.

Both were silent a long moment. Then Willie said, "What kinda bird nest?"

"Why, a bird . . . a bird . . . any kind of bird . . . a robin or something like that. What difference does it make?" said Elmer, irritably but uncertainly.

"Yuh mean," said Willie, "did we rob a song-bird nest yesterday?"

"Yes, I s'pose that's exactly what I mean, young man."

"No, sir, we never," said Willie promptly.

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"We ain't never robbed a songbird nest. Songbirds are helpful birds 'cause they eat bugs and things that are harmful to gardens and all. We don't never bother 'em."

"Now, look a-here, young man; you was seen in the act of robbing a bird nest yesterday. What do you say to that?"

"Whereabouts was we seen?"

"In that big vacant lot at the end of Grand Avenue."

"Who seen us?"

"Miz Jimmersan that lives in the old house there."

"Well," said Willie, "if Miz Jimmersan says she seen us rob a songbird nest in that vacant lot yesterday, why, she's a doggone liar."

"Why, Willie!" said Mrs. Farrier.

"Well, she is, mamma. 'Cause we never done it."

"Wait, now," said Elmer. "Were you in the lot yesterday?"

"Yessir, we was. We're there pretty near every day."

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"Did you throw something at a tree there?"

"Yeh, we threw a rock."

"Ah, now we're getting somewhere. Did one of you climb the tree?"

"Well . . . uh . . . Tom climbed it."

"You told me to," said Tom.

"Never mind that, now," said Elmer. "Did you, Tom, rob a bird nest in that tree?"

"He never robbed no songbird nest," said Willie quickly. "I tole yuh that once already."

"But, confound it, Miz Jimmersan seen him do it!" cried Elmer.

"She never seen Tom rob no songbird nest!" cried back Willie. "I don't care what she saw."

"Now, wait," said Mrs. Farrier, who had been through things like this with her sons many times before and knew how interminable and inconclusive they were apt to be. "There was a bird nest in the tree, wasn't there?"

"Yeh, I guess so," mumbled Willie.

"Did Tom take anything out of it?"

"Yeh, I guess so."

"What did he take?"

"Well, it was an owl nest, mamma, and Tom

PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT got the baby owls. Owls ain't songbirds, and there ain't no law against catching 'em. Owls are harmful birds, 'cause they kill songbirds and chickens and pigeons and things. Ain't that right, Mister Paisley?"

But Elmer refused the question. "So you did rob a bird nest, eh?"

"It wasn't no songbird nest. There's a lot of difference."

"There's no difference at all," said Elmer sharply. "I was afraid of this, Miz Farrier."

Mrs. Farrier was crushed. "Oh, Willie! To think you would do such a thing! I just can't believe it! I just can't!"

"Mamma, we never did nothing wrong," insisted Willie. "Owls ain't songbirds. We don't go around hurting songbirds. 'Sides, we never hurt the owls, neither. They're just as good as they ever was."

"What did you do with them?" demanded Elmer.

"They're in the woodshed," said Willie beligerently.

"They must be put back in their nest," said



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Elmer with decision. "That will remedy matters somewhat."

"Aw, no! We're gonna keep 'em for pets!" cried Willie.

"I said they go back to their nest!" snapped Elmer. "Take me to them."

The boys' lower lips were dangling pugnaciously. Mrs. Farrier said, "Yes, boys, you must put them back where you found them."

"Well, come on, then!" said Willie surlily. And all four of them trooped back to the woodshed.

The owlets greeted them with a high, peeping clamor. A few droplets of meat were near by in a saucer from a former feeding, and Willie fed them one by one. Mrs. Farrier was touched by the trustful way the chicks sat in her son's small brown hand, eating from his trembling fingers. And, without thinking, she said, "Oh, aren't they the darlinest little things! Just look at them!"

Elmer Paisley, however, was more conservative. "I am glad," he said, "that you did not damage them."

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The boys pleaded once more to be allowed to keep them. But Elmer was adamant. "They must be put back in their nest. I will go with you and see that you put them there."

And, in the end, the owlets were placed in a paper bag, and Tom and Willie took them reluctantly to the vacant lot where stood the home tree.

Elmer rode slowly along on his bicycle in time with the boys' pace. At the vacant lot, Elmer sized up the dead tree and was appalled.

"How far up is the owl nest?" he asked dubiously.

"Aw, it's in that big hole right under the thick snag," said Tom, pointing.

Thereupon Elmer demanded, "Do you mean to tell me you climbed all the way up there unassisted?"

"Sure," said Tom, putting the owlets in his shirt and preparing to do it all over again.

"Wait!" said Elmer Paisley firmly. "It is far too dangerous a climb for a boy of your size. I cannot allow it. You might fall and kill yourself."

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"How we gonna put the owls back, then?"

Elmer thought. "I'll do the climbing myself," he said. "It would be criminal of me to order you to do it. Give me the owls."

Tom handed them over, and Elmer put them in his shirt. "I haven't climbed a tree in thirty years," he sighed, "but I am afraid it is my duty." He propped his bicycle against the trunk to give him a start from the ground, and, from that vantage point, began slowly swarming up the bare bole. The Farrier boys stood by as professionally interested spectators. Mrs. Jimmer-san happened to look on from her window, too, and was dumbfounded.

At a point six or eight feet from the ground, Elmer's shirt pocket caught on a splinter. In endeavoring to free it, Elmer lost his grip and came crashing down. His bicycle broke his fall; he sustained only a cracked elbow.

"Gosh, Mister Paisley, are yuh hurt?" cried the alarmed Farriers.

"Noooo," groaned Elmer, "I don't think so. But, see? I told you how dangerous it was, didn't I?"

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In his dazed state, he righted his bicycle and started wheeling it from the lot.

"Where yuh going?" asked the boys uncertainly.

"I gotta see a doctor about this arm at once," mumbled Elmer through gritted teeth. "It might be broken or something."

"Yeh, but what about the owls?"

"Oh, bother the owls!" said Elmer as a welter of pain transshot him.

"Yeh, but, heck, Mister Paisley, they're still in yer shirt. They're liable to smother, ain't they?"

Elmer, the sweat dripping from his face, stopped wheeling his bicycle. "Very well. Get them out," he ordered.

The boys thrust their hands into his shirt and lifted out the young owls who blinked and peeped at them cheerfully.

"What'll we do with 'em now?" asked Willie. "Should Tom climb up there and put 'em back like yuh wanted?"

"Good God, no!" snarled Elmer. "Stay away from that tree! Take the owls home and feed

PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT them. I'll get a ladder or something in the morning. Good-by!"

They were now upon Grand Avenue. Elmer mounted his bicycle and rode waveringly off, steering with his good arm and stupefied from the pain in his elbow. Willie and Tom went home with the owls.

"For heaven's sake, you still have them!" gasped their mother.

Willie explained, "Aw, crazy ole Elmer Paisley fell outa the doggone tree and hurt himself, so he tole us to keep 'em till he could get a ladder or something. Shoot, Tom could of climbed the doggone tree without falling out, easy."

"I done it once," said Tom proudly.

Mrs. Farrier said, "You say Elmer hurt himself? Badly?"

"Naw, he just busted his arm or something," said Willie.

No more was heard from Elmer for two days. Then the telephone rang, and it was he again. He told Mrs. Farrier briefly that he had secured

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a ladder and that the boys must be ready at once to take the owls back again, as he was determined this time finally to put them in their rightful nest and make no bones about it.

"Yes, they'll be ready," said Mrs. Farrier. "I promise you they will. How is your arm now, Elmer?"

"It still hurts," said Elmer, "but I can use it."

The boys once more put the owlets in a paper sack and sat down on the front steps to wait for Elmer.

In about fifteen minutes, the hook-and-ladder wagon of the fire department came slowly down the street and stopped in front of their house. All the neighbors rushed to their windows. "What on earth?" said Mrs. Farrier.

Elmer Paisley, arm in sling, sat beside the driver. "Come on, boys!" he called. "We mustn't waste the fire department's valuable time."

"Gosh, can we ride, too?" cried the Farriers.

"Yeh, hop on," said the driver. And he turned to the other fireman who rode behind

PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT and said out of the side of his mouth, "Gawdam, if this ain't the dumbest stunt I ever hearn tell of."

The fire truck rolled slowly down the street without siren, bell, or fanfare. Under Elmer's direction, the driver turned it into the lane which skirted the vacant lot. But then suddenly, in a startled voice, Elmer cried, "Stop!"

The driver applied the brakes and came to a halt. "'Smatter?"

"The tree!" said Elmer. "The tree!"

"'Swrong with it?" asked the driver.

"It ain't there," said Elmer, and he leaped from the truck.

"Horsecollar," said the driver.

The Farrier boys dismounted and followed Elmer to where the tree formerly had stood. It was still there, but standing no longer. Apparently it had fallen during the night, for it lay shattered in four or five pieces in the waist-high weeds. The section where the screech owls had had their nest was crushed to matchwood.

"Well?" called the driver.

"You men can return to the station," mum-

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bled Elmer. He started walking rapidly across the field. The two firemen and the Farriers watched him silently till he was out of sight.

“Well?” said the driver again.

“Aw, hell, let’s beat it,” said the other one. “That Elmer Paisley is the dam’dest crackpot I ever seen.”

“Do you s’pose we can keep the owls?” Willie asked the firemen.

“You kin as far as I’m concerned,” said the driver. “You kids want a ride back?”

“Gosh, yes!” said both of them.

The baby owls grew to owlhood. One by one, they left the woodshed and flew away. For a time, they returned now and then in the early evening to drive Mrs. Farrier nearly crazy with their strange and beautiful night songs. But eventually they left the Farrier back yard for good, and the boys never saw them again.





## *Chapter Six*

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ONCE AGAIN, NOW, vacation time had come. Meadow larks nested in the grass of the cow pastures; from every sycamore the yellow-hammers called. The frogs sang again in Frogpond, and the snapping turtles roiled the muck of Jackson's Branch. Cockleburs and morning-glories grew along the roadsides. Every morning the corn-fields were as wet as ponds with dew.

It was just another summer, but the Farrier boys had waited for it all winter long and none

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too patiently. All that winter they had talked of summer and the new places they would go and the odd places they would explore. Fourteen and twelve now, they felt they had outgrown Frogpond and Jackson's Branch and their adjacent fields and orchards. They were avid for the new and unexplored country westward and beyond; they planned excursions that would take them miles.

Helen Farrier had listened to them idly and fondly, glad that school and winter hemmed them in and kept their travels in the mere talking stage. They even found a large map somewhere of the county and traced routes on it with pencil. They were amazed at the network of creeks and streams all close about within a distance of not more than a few miles, and they resolved to go and see them all. And Helen Farrier looked at the map with them and pointed things out even they had not noticed and was happy it was winter.

Then summer came abruptly—long before she was ready for it—and with it came vacation time; the second day of vacation Willie asked

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her if she'd fix him and Tom some lunch next day 'cause they wanted to take a long hike.

"Oh, goodness!" said Mrs. Farrier, sorry now she had tacitly agreed to their projects during the winter. "Why do you want to go so far?"

"'Cause, mamma, it's like we've been saying: there ain't anything much left close to town any more. Why, gosh, you got to go pretty near five miles 'fore you can even see a rabbit. Ever'thing's been scared 'way out in the country where there ain't so many people around."

"Well . . . but, oh, Willie, you used to be perfectly content just to go to Frogpond or Jackson's Branch, and then I didn't worry about you because they're so close to here. You never used to insist on covering miles and miles."

"Yeh, but we were little kids then, mamma, and, heck, Frogpond's just like it was in the back yard and so's Jackson's Branch. There ain't anything in 'em, anyhow, but just old frogs and turtles, and we know all about them."

"Well, where is it you want to go tomorrow?"

"We wanta follow up Brushy Creek to where

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it runs into Muddy like it shows on the map."

"But that sounds so silly!"

"Why, it ain't silly, neither, mamma!" And it wasn't—not to them. For the urge which was upon them was exactly the same urge, and certainly no less potent, as that which fired Lewis and Clark, or De Soto, or Livingstone, or any of them.

"What if you get lost?"

"Well, how can we get lost, mamma? All we gotta do when we wanta come back is follow Brushy back to whur Jackson's Branch runs into it, then cut across lots to town."

"Well . . . but . . . oh, all right. I'll fix you some lunch. But you've got to promise to be very careful."

"Oh, we will, mamma. We're always real careful."

And so the precedent for all-day excursions was established.

On that first exploration down winding Brushy Creek to its confluence with Muddy, the boys learned many things. They discovered the

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guilty feeling which dogs one when he crosses land clearly posted: "Keep Out! No Trespassing! This Means You!" They discovered that a herd of mules is likely to attack any living thing the mules see on foot. They discovered that a sow with young pigs is even more ferocious than a mule. They discovered that farmers are definitely hostile people and take manifest delight in roaring at small boys to get the hell off their land. But they discovered also that by scurrying along a creek bank, just at the water's edge, concealed by both bank and bushes, they were invisible to enemy eyes the greater part of the time, and that the simplest way to get somewhere without interruption was stay along the creek bank where the farmers, the sows, the mules, and all the other hostile forces could not detect them.

That first trip was purely practice. And it was one fraught with a thousand tense moments. They were so busy keeping under cover and solving problems of getting through apparently impenetrable barbed-wire fences and thorn thickets and dodging potential enemies

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that they had no opportunity to do anything else.

And it was days before they felt sure enough of themselves in those strange reaches of savage, wild farmlands even to take time out to climb trees and look in holes, peer under rocks and overhanging ledges, poke into brush piles, or otherwise make intensive search for wild things.

Those first trips were furtive affairs, characterized, no doubt, by much unnecessary maneuvering brought on by false or only fancied fears; but gradually the boys began to feel more assured in the wilderness and to look more for signs of game and less for hint of the enemy.

And they found soon enough that even in climes far from the end of the pavement—five, six, and seven miles from the city limits—there still was not that superabundance of animal life their hopes and imaginations had led them to believe would be there. For there were no wolves, and there were no foxes. There were no jack rabbits, and there were no wildcats. It was rare to see a cottontail, rarer to see a squirrel. Crows could be seen, but only at tre-

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mendous distances. Hawks kept even farther away than the crows. Once they did find a great horned owl. From the gloom of a pine tree's high branch, he brooded down at them with smoldering yellow eyes. But he was so much larger than their little screech owls had been that he frightened them, even though he sat high above them. They tossed a rock at him, and he flew off, and they were relieved that he did so.

Now and then, too, they saw a big turtle floating on the surface of some wide hole in Muddy, but turtles in Muddy Creek were far less in evidence than in Jackson's Branch. Huge bullfrogs maintained a thinly-scattered population, but the number of little frogs could not match the number at Frogpond. And the boys came to the conclusion that out in the wilds the animals, though unaccountably scarce, did attain extraordinary size; possibly it was necessary for them to do so in order to wrest a living from nature.

After a while they discovered new kinds of turtles as opposed to the single type of common

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snapper in Jackson's Branch. They caught a baby Bell's terrapin and were delighted with his pretty green back, his scarlet-striped throat, and his orange-and-yellow undershell. They caught a Cumberland terrapin—even more colorful than the Bell's. And once in a landlocked pool near Muddy they found that strangest of all of the Middle West's freshwater beasts, the soft-shell turtle. Its back is as flexible as soapy leather. Its tail is but a vestige, and its nose has a snout long and sharp and thin. Its shell underneath is as scanty as a brassière and as little protective; the turtle, unable to withdraw its legs, can only tuck them under as does a rabbit. But then, too, the boys caught a box tortoise. It lived on dry land, used water only as something to drink, ate nothing but berries and herbs, and could close itself up as completely as if it had been a clam or an oyster.

They brought none of those turtles home; they were content now with merely looking at them a long while after catching them and then freeing them. They had had turtles for pets



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once, but the first great fascination had worn off.

It was something new and different that they yearned for; and it was not until midsummer that they found it.

After weeks of traveling the hard way, it finally occurred to them that the shortest and easiest and safest route to Muddy Creek was not along the banks of Brushy, but straight out the Missouri Pacific railroad tracks to a certain crossroad, then down the crossroad, then across an eighty-acre cornfield; and there was Muddy, lolling coffee-colored and lazy between willow-lined banks. Downstream half a mile, Brushy found its junction—a narrow, shallow riffle over which Brushy gurgled indifferently.

That confluence of the two creeks always gave the boys a feeling of disappointment; it seemed so casual and unromantic. Before they found it, they had visualized it as a wide, deep wild spot of raging waters where, between high, cleft banks, Brushy ran to her wedding with a roar. Instead, it was all very piffling: Muddy

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was shallow enough to wade across, and Brushy was so narrow they could leap over it; the banks were flat and weedy and knee-deep with mud.

But upcreek, perhaps two miles, Coon Creek ran into Muddy. Coon Creek had no sewage pouring into it and, for most of its length, ran through gravelly terrain and hence was nice and clear, whereas Brushy was always foul with humus and the garbage of Jackson's Branch. Coon Creek's confluence with Muddy, furthermore, was far more satisfying than Brushy's. For Coon Creek joined up in a tremendous darksome dell full of towering sycamores and elms and soft maples. Coon Creek ran straight into Muddy, broadside, without any silly riffle in the way to slow it down. And its clear waters shoved back the muddy waters of Muddy for a long way before they finally gave in to mingle with them and lose their identity.

It was mysterious, and awesome, too, under the magnificent sycamores whose leaves shut out the sky and were always whispering in the wind. A few squirrels visited there; now and again the boys caught sight of a gray squirrel

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or a fox squirrel streaking from limb to limb  
as it sought its nest or its hole.

On the whole, the Coon Creek territory was far more alluring than that of Brushy; the Farriers found themselves going there more and more often; and it was on a time when they had followed far up Coon Creek itself that their search was rewarded.

They had followed up Coon Creek so far they were almost in the next county. They were eating their lunch at a bend along its banks where the creek ran through a grove of second-growth hickory. Wild grapevines trailed from every hickory tree. In every other tree a squirrel nest was to be seen. The boys thought they had found the spawning ground of squirrels for the entire state, and as they ate they whispered in wonderment at the incredible number of nests.

Yet all the while they were eating they saw not a single squirrel; the rodents apparently were asleep or away; and, after their lunch, reinvigorated by the sandwiches their mother had

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made, the boys concluded that if they were to see any squirrels they would have to stir them up themselves.

So Willie selected a tendril-like grapevine which dangled from a lithe hickory that had in its fork a fat, fresh-looking nest of green leaves, and he tugged up and down on the vine as might a sexton on a bellcord. The hickory swayed; the nest shook. Willie jerked harder; the nest squirmed and heaved. All at once, out of it one after the other leaped three gray squirrels; they rushed off through the neighboring hickory tops.

"See?" said Willie with much satisfaction. "That's the way to get 'em out."

"Doggone!" said Tom. And he tried it.

Plenty of trees, vines, and nests were available, but only that first nest yielded squirrels.

"Sure seems funny," said the boys. "There must be lots more of 'em. Just them three couldn't of built all these fool nests."

And they persevered, but still no squirrels.

Then they found a large nest that was built low enough in its tree almost to be touched by

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a tall man. "Let's poke into that'n with a pole or something," said Tom. "I don't think just shaking 'em is enough."

So they pulled over a dead hickory sapling, broke it off at the roots, stripped off its dead branches, and converted it into a punching pole. They prodded the nest gently with it. The nest heaved violently, as had the one which hid the three squirrels, but nothing came out. The boys prodded again—harder this time. Again the nest heaved, and leaves floated from it and eddied to the ground.

Willie, excited and exasperated, then tried to use the pole as a club, but the pole broke in the middle.

"Darn it, that would happen!" he said. "But there's sure something in the nest, all right."

"Why don't it come out, then?" asked Tom.

"I dunno . . . hey! I bet I do know! It's baby squirrels and they're scared to come out! Climb up there and see."

"Naw, it's your turn to climb. I climbed that last tree where you said it looked like a crow's nest was."

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"Yeh, but that was the other day, and it don't count no more."

"It does too count."

"Naw, it don't, either. G'wan and climb up there, Tom. Heck, it's only a little ways, and you know doggone good and well there's something in the nest."

"Yeh, but squirrels bite like the dickens."

"Well, the baby ones don't. They ain't big enough. Anyhow, you can just shake the nest out, and I'll catch 'em on the ground."

That seemed feasible enough, so Tom clambered up the swaying hickory. He climbed above the nest and put his foot on the branch which bore it.

"Get ready," he warned Willie. "I'm gonna stomp it out."

"I'm all set," Willie assured him.

Tom jumped up and down on the limb, making it thrash violently. The nest weathered the thrashing a moment or two, then became detached and fell to the ground with a decided thump.

"My gosh, there's something big in it!"

PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT yelled Willie. "Golly, it's a 'possum, I think! C'mon down, quick!"

Tom went down the hickory as a fireman goes down the emergency pole. "Don't let him get away! Don't let him get away!"

The 'possum, for such it was, dazed by the fall, snarled from the heap of leaves, squirmed around uncertainly, and tried to trot off. But Willie grabbed its long rat tail and lifted it from the ground so that its feet clawed futilely in the air.

The capture, for that was all there was to it, had been so easy that the boys could hardly believe it. Here they had a ten-pound wild animal, equipped with fur and teeth and claws, yet all that its capture had entailed was the shaking it out of a tree and picking it up from the ground—nothing in any way, shape, or form as strenuous as the capture of a snapping turtle.

The 'possum, convinced that further active protestation was futile, tried a different strategy and dissembled death. It became all limp; its eyes closed glazedly; from its jaws a gummy,

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silvery saliva drooled. It certainly looked dead.

"But it ain't," said Willie. "That's the way they always act. That's where people get that stuff about playing 'possum. It's a good thing, too, for he'll be easier to take home this way."

"Gosh! Should we take him home?"

"Sure! He'll make a swell pet. 'Course we'll take him home."

"Yeh, but I betcha mamma won't like it."

"Oh, heck, mamma never said anything about 'possums. She just said she didn't want us to get no more turtles or owls or things like that. 'Possums are different; they're more like cats and dogs; they get real tame."

Mrs. Farrier had put up the boys' lunch in a flour sack. The lunch was simple to carry in such a container, for one of the boys could tie the sack's long mouth to his belt and that way have both hands free. Their food now eaten, the boys took the empty flour sack and put the 'possum in it.

The 'possum was a very handsome specimen as 'possums go. It had long black guard hairs sprouting from and overlapping its wool. It had



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a muscular yellow tail which was almost hairless except for a scattering of bristles. Its feet were clean and yellow and all the claws were intact. It had the heavy musky smell that is peculiar to 'possums and was very plump and evidently well fed.

The boys explored no more that day; they took their prize straight home as speedily as they could.

Once more, the woodshed in the back yard was utilized as a home for their pet. They argued that if such industrious delvers as the snapping turtles had been unable ever to dig out, the 'possum surely would be unable also, so they merely dumped it out of the sack and gave it the run of the whole shed. They watched it nose around suspiciously till it found cover in a dusty box, then they went to tell their mother about it and query her on what it was most likely to eat.

Said their mother without notable enthusiasm, "So now you have a 'possum?"

"Uh huh, and he sure is a dandy. We wanta

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feed him, mamma. What do you s'pose he eats?"

Mrs. Farrier thought hard about 'possums, trying to recall all she had ever heard about them and their diet. She knew she had once heard something, and at last her thoughts jelled upon that something. It was a complaint which Mrs. Marks, the farmer's wife who sold her butter and eggs, had made. "Name uh Gawd," Mrs. Marks had then said, "some dev'lish crittur got inter our hencoop last night an' et all the aigs an' kilt a half a dozen fryers. Paw claimed it must of been a 'possum, an' he's done already set a trap fer it."

"They eat chickens and eggs," said Mrs. Farrier. "And, now, listen here, both of you! If this 'possum of yours gets loose and eats Tar Beach's chickens and eggs, I'm going to have you both sent to reform school, because I'm sick and tired of forever getting into trouble over your awful pets."

"Heck, mamma, he can't get out. We got the door locked."

"He'll dig out."

"How can he when the turtles couldn't?"

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"I don't know, but he will. I feel it in my bones."

"Well, course, we can make a pen for him with a box or something, but it ain't hardly worth while."

"Oh, why don't you just take him back where you found him and turn him loose? You don't want an old 'possum."

"Aw, we do, too, mamma! Gosh, we never had nothing like him before."

"Well, you make a good strong pen for him, then, and you do it right away. Hear me?"

"Yes, mamma, we will." And the boys made a pen by nailing pigeon wire over the open end of a medium-size packing box. A door they fashioned by prying loose one of the top boards and holding it in place thereafter by putting a couple of bricks on top of it. They put their 'possum in the new pen and gave it a pan of bread and gravy and a pan of water.

"We haven't any chickens, and I can't spare any eggs," their mother had said. "See if he won't eat this bread and gravy."

Both boys were outspokenly skeptical of their

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pet's taking to such ordinary fare, but the 'possum let them down by gobbling up the bread and gravy immediately the smell of it wafted to its white, pulpy nose.

"Seel!" said Mrs. Farrier in triumph. "I knew he'd eat it."

The 'possum, as the days went on, seemed perfectly content with its pen and its rations of bread and meat gravy. It spent most of its time asleep, refused to become alarmed over anything in particular, allowed the boys to pick it up by the tail or the middle, didn't bother to play dead any more, and, all in all, appeared to be spending an ideal summer.

It was after a three-day rainy spell, when the boys had put its pen out in the yard that it might soak up some sunshine, that the 'possum worked its only miracle. The boys were looking at it disinterestedly. It lay on its side, presumably slumbering, its feet curled up against its fur, its fat tummy rolling out in a round ball. That was the way it always acted when put in the sun.

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But all of a sudden something happened.

The 'possum's fat tummy began to open—as might, perhaps, the mouth of a sack that could open of its own volition. The aperture in the tummy widened and spread, revealing a soft pinkness within. It distended to a diameter of about three inches; it disclosed ten tiny baby 'possums, red, blind and hairless, no larger than June bugs. They squirmed feebly, avid for the mammary glands.

“It's got babies!” gasped Tom.

“It's having babies!” corrected Willie.

“Naw, it's already got 'em!” insisted Tom.

They ran for their mother. “Mamma, mamma! Come look! The 'possum's got about a million babies!”

Mrs. Farrier came and looked, and was as bewildered as her sons. Sure enough, there the babies were, but it didn't seem right somehow. It seemed a distinctly unusual mode of having or, at any rate, displaying, one's offspring, and, in a way, it was frightening. She resolved to find out about 'possums right away. She went back to the house and took down the dictionary, it

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being the only source book she could think of  
offhand.

Webster defined "opossum" as "an American marsupial." "Marsupial," after further page-thumbing, was defined as "one of a low class of animals, most of which have an abdominal pouch, in the female, for carrying the young."

"Oh, of course!" said Mrs. Farrier. "Just like kangaroos. Now I know."

That is, she thought she knew until her sons began a cross-examination.

"Yeh, but how do they get in that pouch, mamma?"

"What does a 'possum have a pouch for, when cats and dogs don't?"

"How long do they stay in there?"

"How come the babies is so doggone little?"

"Are they ackshully born in the pouch, mamma?"

These excited queries awoke the marsupial mother. She opened an eye, seemingly frowned, and drew her pouch closed. Then she yawned, turned over, and went back to sleep.

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"Aw, heck!" said Tom, "I wanted to look at 'em some more."

Mrs. Farrier asked hesitantly, "How many did you count?"

"Ten," said Willie.

"HMMMM," said Mrs. Farrier. "Eleven 'possums. How nice. That's all we'll need for some time, I suppose?"

"Yeh," said Willie, aware of the sarcasm in his mother's voice, "but we didn't know about the doggone babies when we went and caught him."

"Her," corrected Mrs. Farrier.

"Oh, gosh, that's right! We got to quit calling him 'he' now, Tom."

"Why?"

"'Cause, don'tcha see, he's a female."

"Gee, that's right!" admitted Tom.

From then on the young 'possums in the pouch created much discussion between the boys. The great question was: How did they get in the pouch?

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Once, very secretly, they showed their mother 'possum and her brood to George Multin, Jr., and winked knowingly at each other as they asked him to explain how the babies came to be where they were. Very surprisingly, however, George, Jr., had an answer at his fingertips.

"Well, my Uncle Ralph claims," said he, "that baby 'possums is born in the old 'possum's nose, an' she sniffs 'em into her pouch whur they kin nurse. He claimed that one time when I went out to the farm with him an' another guy an' they was a dead 'possum laying in the road, an' him an' this other guy got to talking about 'em."

It was a good explanation, for 'possums do have peculiar-looking noses, and the young Farriers accepted it with awed comment. It was nearly ten years before they learned that actually baby 'possums are born in the manner common to most quadrupeds. Immediately, however, they part from the ordinary routine by making their way back with very little assist-



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ance from their mother into their original state of maternal flesh protection. Of course, just how a tiny, blind, helpless grub has the instinct or the capacity to crawl through a jungle of hair from one zone to another is still pretty much of a mystery to them or anyone else who has ever pondered the matter.

The little 'possums grew. They opened their eyes; they clothed themselves with fur; they became as large as mice; they became restive in their mother's pouch.

The time came when the pouch would no longer hold them; then they ranged all over their mother, clutching her long hair with their skinny little hands, hanging to and dangling from her as she moved about. They still nursed; she would lie on her back and spread wide the mouth of her pouch; and then the ten young ones would rush to the feast.

By the time they were as large as rats they would nibble tentatively at their mother's dish of bread and gravy. And an uncontrollable spirit of unrest fell upon them, too, at this time; during the evening they would parade

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about the pen seeking an exit, and it took them no time at all to discover that they were still small enough to go easily through the apertures of the pigeon wire. For a while, as do baby chicks, they always returned to their mother. But then the evening came when they discovered they could get out of the woodshed through a crack under the door; and out under the crack they went.

The whole world spread before them; they spread in ten different directions, and away they went on their first and last journey.

For they were the size of rats; they looked a great deal like rats; to the lay eye, they were rats. And it was as rats that they were slain.

Tar Beach slew the first. He saw a rat on his front walk, a pale, fat out-of-proportion rat, very unsteady on its feet, not at all agile or alert as rats usually are. Tar decided it was a sick rat; he stamped upon it.

Other neighbors had the same experience; it seemed as if the neighborhood were suddenly plagued by strange, lethargic rats which made

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no attempt whatever to escape, which never seemed really to be bothering anything or going anywhere, which only toddled along with oddly curling tails, in stupid uncertainty.

In two days all were killed and accounted for. Still thinking they were rats, and remembering dread legends of bubonic plague, the neighbors talked among themselves, retrieved one of the dead babies from a trash heap, and had it examined by a doctor.

“ ’Tain’t a rat at all,” said the perplexed doctor after examining it. “It don’t have a rodent’s dentition, and it don’t have a rodent’s feet. I never saw an animal like it before, but it ain’t a rat, and I can’t find any germs in its saliva or guts. Harmless, whatever it is.”

Mrs. Farrier was told of the proceedings by Mrs. Howard. “Isn’t it strange?” said Mrs. Howard. “Those queer little animals, and no one knows what they are.”

“I know what they are,” said Mrs. Farrier sadly.

“You do? What?”

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"Baby 'possums."

"What on earth?"

"Yes. Willie and Tom caught an old 'possum with young ones. The babies grew up a little and then the other day they all ran away. I told the boys they had probably found their way back to the wilds. These silly people have been killing them, thinking they were rats. I hope the boys don't find out about it; it would break their hearts."

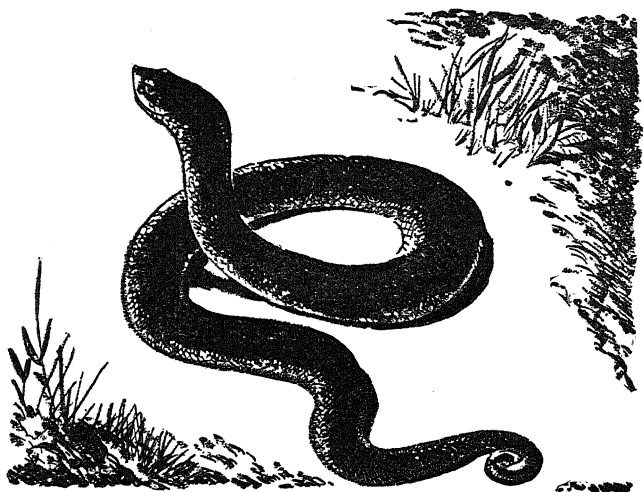
The boys never did find out definitely. The babies were all gone, but they accepted as logical their mother's explanation they had returned to the wilds. They would have found it hard to believe that even their neighbors could kill a 'possum on the assumption it was a rat.

In September, just before school opened, they put the old 'possum in a flour sack and took her back to the precise spot where they had caught her. They let her out; she sniffed incuriously at the air, then ambled off into the undergrowth and disappeared.

"I wonder," said Tom as she went out of

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sight, "if she'll ever come across her doggone  
babies."

"I dunno," said Willie, "but she'll probably  
have another mess of 'em next year, anyhow."



## *Chapter Seven*

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THE SUMMER which was exemplified by Benji was the last summer the Farrier boys had any pets. For they were getting to be big boys, physically as well as in their own minds, and the next summer, when Willie was sixteen, he went to work at the Missouri Pacific railroad shops as a car carpenter apprentice, and Tom, fourteen, secured a paper route delivering the *Kansas City Star and Times*. ("And high time, too!" said the neighbors. "Now, they kin help

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their mother with the bills a little, 'stead of always tearing out in the country and catching things.")

But in Benji and his brethren, their last pets, poetically they seemed to find the summation of all their yearnings after the strange, the wild, and the beautiful; after Benji and his brethren there was nothing else to look for, unless they went to a new state or a new continent.

It was in the late spring of the year that they discovered the possibilities of the reservoir at the city water works. The reservoir was near Flat Creek which was on the opposite side of town from Muddy Creek; it was a square, shallow, artificial lake a mile in circumference. Its sides were made of rock. Lots of fish were in it, but fishing was prohibited. There was no ordinance, however, which made walking around it and looking at it a crime.

It was the largest body of water the Farrier boys had ever seen. Coots and grebes now and then could be discovered bobbing and diving in its clear little waves; and, as soon as they discovered the employes thereabout were disin-

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clined to yell at them and chase them away,  
Willie and Tom went to the reservoir quite  
often.

They saw the first snake there in mid-May. It  
was a brown water snake, a big fat one which  
slid off its sunning spot on a flat rock and  
slipped into the water, where it secreted itself  
under a submerged slab.

"Geel!" they said. "It musta been a water  
moccasin."

They walked eagerly on around the reser-  
voir, and, in its mile of rock-lined shore, saw  
seven more water snakes of different sizes and  
species. One and all, the snakes acted exactly  
as had the first: when the boys' approach dis-  
turbed them they slid off the bank and wrig-  
gled beneath some rock just under the water.

"Doggone!" said the Farriers. "There's as  
many snakes here as there is snapping turtles in  
Jackson's Branch."

They had had little or no contact with snakes  
before; they had seen one or two fleetingly as  
they had wandered around the countryside;  
but, as did every other boy in town, and



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grown-up, too, they considered snakes one and all to be poisonous—things to be killed if they chanced too close; things, at any rate, to be avoided warily.

Yet, now, they had seen quite a number of snakes in a very short time, and seen them fairly close-up; and both boys began to admit to themselves that they did not seem nearly so terrible as the snake legend would lead one to believe.

They walked around the reservoir once more and saw even more snakes than they did on the first circuit. "Ain't it funny," said Tom, "the way things find places they like and sort of stick there? All them turtles at Jackson's Branch. All them squirrel nests up on Coon Creek. And now all these snakes here in this doggone reservoir."

"Yeh," said Willie. "I guess they try to find places where nobody bothers 'em."

"We ain't never caught a snake yet," hinted Tom.

"I know we ain't," said Willie. "But, gee,

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guy, they're poison; we can't fool with things like that."

And the boys went home, dissatisfied and reluctant, hating the fear of snakes that held them back from doing something that had suddenly sprung up in their hearts.

And next day, Tom again broached the matter uneasily. "Willie, I betcha we *could* catch one of them things if we tried."

"Yeh, I know," said Willie with desperation in his voice. "But a guy's so durn liable to get bit. Then think what'd happen."

And matters were quite unsatisfactory for a number of days until the great day came when Willie accompanied his mother to the public library.

Helen Farrier said to the librarian, "Laura, don't you have any light novels that aren't unhappy and aren't horrid and aren't mysteries?"

"Well, a few, I think," said the librarian doubtfully, and finally she actually did find one for Mrs. Farrier.

Then Willie all at once had an idea. "Do

PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT yuh," he asked timidly of the librarian, "have any books about snakes?"

"Snakes? Oh, yes! We have a marvelous book about snakes and reptiles. Pictures and everything. Would you like to see it?"

"Gosh, yes!" said Willie.

So the librarian went to a special shelf and took down a large green book. It was Raymond L. Ditmars' *The Reptile Book*. More than any other book in the world, that volume opened up new universes for the Farrier boys.

In it were photographs and descriptions of every snake and turtle in North America. In it was each of the exact snakes they had seen at the reservoir on their trips. Anticlimactically, however, Willie discovered that none of those snakes was poisonous; on the contrary, each was practically as harmless as a garden toad.

Willie took the book home, chafing at his mother's more conservative slow gait, hardly being able to wait till he could open it and read to his heart's content. Tom demanded it immediately he saw the frontispiece; finally they had to compromise on reading it together. After

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they had more or less surfeited themselves on the snakes' sections, they dug into the chapters on turtles. There, at last, they found why their snappers had never eaten in the woodshed: Ditmars explained that snappers were able to eat only under water. The shallow dishpan the boys had sunk in the floor had not been deep enough or obvious enough for their turtles to utilize as a dining room.

Lizards and crocodilians were also in the book; in fact, such an expansive array of reptilian life was described and pictured that the boys were awestruck. But, for them, the snakes superseded everything else.

Ditmars noted one thing the boys had already discovered for themselves at the reservoir: a water snake has a particular small area of rock and water which it calls its home, and is usually to be found close by there, never straying away very far. Six times, at least, they had seen that first big brown water snake on the exact rock where they first saw him. And each of those six times he repeated his original act of slipping off

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the rock and hiding himself beneath the same slab under the water at the reservoir's edge.

Ditmars indicated the best way to handle a snake was by the back of the neck, supporting the rest of him with the other hand around his middle. That way, the snake couldn't hurt its captor, and the captor couldn't hurt it. The boys held a number of consultations and discussions; they ended in a decision to catch the big brown fellow.

They took a flour sack and went to the reservoir. There, on his hallowed rock, was the reptile. They walked toward him cautiously but excitedly. He raised his head a little, then slipped quietly off. They rushed down the bank and saw him sliding under the slab, stirring up the mud particles which clung there.

Willie jumped down to the water's edge and plunged his hand, do or die, under the slab. He could feel rough, squashy, keeled scales rub by his fingers as the snake started to squirm away. He grabbed somewhere about the middle of the moving coils, yanked the snake from under the slab, and flung it high up on the bank to

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Tom. In the weeds where it fell the reptile writhed and wiggled, attempting to get back to the water. But Tom pinned it to the ground with a stick, and then Willie got back up the bank and pinned down its head with another stick.

Tom put his fingers around the snake's neck close to the head and caught it by the middle, too. Willie released pressure on his stick, and Tom lifted the squirming thing from the weeds.

It went into a convulsion of twisting and writhing, opening its mouth ferociously as it screwed its jaws around in attempts to bite. But all that came to nothing, for it couldn't get to Tom's hand or fingers, and finally the water snake resorted to its last stratagem: the voiding of its musk sacs, and the retching of its dinner. Most snakes do the same thing, apparently on the theory that if a demonstration of ferocity won't make a captor turn it loose, perhaps sheer nastiness will. (Among birds, buzzards make a habit of retching on the enemy, while among fur-bearers, the civets are famous for their highly specialized development of the musk

PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT system.) However, not content with either alone, the snakes try both.

But Tom held on to his snake in spite of everything, and Willie opened the flour sack, and the big brown fellow was dropped inside and tied there.

So they caught their first snake. It was much the same as their catching of a water beetle, a snapping turtle, or a 'possum. They separated abruptly from its natural element the thing to be captured, then enclosed it in a container where it could not harm them, attempting to do all that without being bitten in the accomplishment thereof. The same basic principles apply, no doubt, in the capture of a tiger, an octopus, or a criminal.

They did not know it at the time, but they had chosen for their first snake the least tractable, most sullen and uninteresting of all its clan. For the brown water snake is delicate in captivity and highly temperamental about eating, and just mopes around miserably, ever on the alert for a chance to sink its nasty little pinpoint teeth despairingly in someone's hand or

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arm. It is not a symmetrically beautiful snake as are the racers, nor is it prettily marked as are the Colubers. It's flattish and flaccid and feels squashy when picked up, as if its hide were a half size or so too large for the flesh it encloses. It's sort of a dingy, rusty color, and its eyes have no more lustre than a pig's. Of course, it is a master swimmer and displays much vivacity and grace in the water, but, in a box in the woodshed, its skin all dry and flaking, coiled in an untidy clot, smelling like a sewer, it makes a distressing sight.

But with all those disagreeable features, it was still, nonetheless, the Farriers' first snake, and they thought very highly of it. They carried it home with utmost care, stopping every half-mile or so to untie the mouth of the sack and peer in to ascertain if it was making the journey safely.

On the way home, too, they discussed the advisability of telling their mother about it. For a short while, their attitude was: "Oh, sure. Mamma's a good sport. She wouldn't care about just one old snake." But just before they got



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home their attitude changed rapidly to: "Yeh, but maybe it'd be better if we don't tell her. She's liable to worry or something, although, of course, there ain't nothing to worry about."

So the brown water snake secretly was put in a box in the woodshed, and at dinner the boys refrained from discussing their excursion that day to the water works reservoir except in general terms.

But having one snake only leads to and then feeds the desire to have hundreds. Tom and Willie caught more. The next one was a pretty, sixteen-inch, common garter snake. They caught it in a slough which bordered the reservoir where the water snake was taken. They had disturbed him as they walked along the slough's edge; he swam out over the scummy water, a slender, bright, speedy ribbon. They waded after him and grabbed him when he dove. He bit at Willie, but his teeth were so tiny they hardly scratched the skin. They took him home and quartered him with the brown water snake.

"Look," said Tom inspiredly, "the doggone

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water snake won't eat these here tadpoles we got for him in the bucket; let's try 'em on the garter snake and see how he acts."

The garter snake acted as if he had been starved for several years, despite the fact he had only been caught an hour before. So ravenous was he that he snatched tadpoles from Willie's fingers and gulped them down before Willie could fish out fresh ones from the bucket.

"Golly, he's worse'n a dog," cried Willie. "Look at him set up and beg."

"Here, lemme feed him, too," said Tom. "How many do yuh reckon he can eat?"

"How many did we have in the bucket?"

"Uh . . . seventeen, I think."

"Well, he's already et six; he oughta be able to handle a few more of 'em. Keep giving 'em to him. He oughta have sense enough to know when he's full up."

"Gee," said Tom. "Look at him! The more he gets, the more he wants. If he eats like this ever' day, we're gonna hafta do nothing but catch polliwogs for him."

The garter snake swallowed down the seven-

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teen tadpoles as a champion hotcake eater swallows batter cakes. When done, he was so fat he could not coil any more, and he could only bend a very little. His hide was so stretched that wide interstices of skin showed between the scales. Then, with no more tadpoles in sight, the world lost all its interest for him. He dragged his stuffed body into the water snake's pan of water, immersed himself altogether except for the tip of his nose, and went to sleep. He was the most contented-looking reptile the Farriers had ever seen; he stayed in the pan three days, apparently without ever moving, and came out fairly slim again.

Actually, he became as tame as a rabbit or a guinea pig and displayed an equal, if not greater, intelligence. For he quickly learned to recognize the boys and, whenever they came around his box, he would rear his head expectantly and follow all their movements; it was obvious he was begging for food.

Later they caught their first genuine land snake—a Say's king snake. They caught him at

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the edge of a cornfield where he lay quiet and unalarmed by them, a big, handsome fellow, black as pitch with a tiny dot of yellow in the middle of each scale. Tom simply picked him up. The king snake thrust forth his tongue, wiggled it, withdrew it, and coiled contentedly about Tom's forearm. That was all there was to the capture. He was the gentlest snake they ever saw.

At the time of his capture they knew not what brand of reptile he was save that he was not poisonous. Ditmars' book had been returned to the library reluctantly after many extensions. So they put him in with the garter snake and the brown water snake, and then went to the library to look him up and identify him.

It was with much delight that they found him to be a king snake, a cannibal of his kind, feeding solely on other snakes and lizards. It seemed fantastic that this comely, quiet fellow could joust with rattler or copperhead or cottonmouth, slay them handily and eat them, their venom not affecting him, his power of in-

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tense constriction throttling the life out of them mercilessly and speedily. Ditmars, too, told very pointedly how he always kept his king snakes segregated and living alone lest they slay and eat their companions.

The boys remembered they had quartered their king snake with the garter snake and the water snake. They put *The Reptile Book* back on the shelf and sped home. But it was too late. The Say's king snake had already eaten the garter snake, and he had killed the big brown water snake. Vainly, even as the boys entered the woodshed, he was trying to swallow him and had him part way down. Willie grabbed the king snake, and Tom grabbed the water snake, and they pulled the latter from the former's maw. But the water snake was limp and dead. They mourned over him a while and cried imprecations on his slayer. They buried him where no one was likely to come upon his corpse.

At first, thereafter, they were inclined to revile the Say's king snake for so abruptly depleting their stock. But gradually they began to

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feel a monstrous admiration for him; he was such an efficient slaughterer, and after all, it was only his nature. Furthermore, he was a sleek, firm, muscular reptile and felt good to the touch. The water snake and the garter snake had been such awkward things, inept and out of place on land. But the Say's king snake was lustrous and alert, graceful and at ease. He was cool and unexcitable; he liked to wrap himself around their arms or poke his nose into their shirts and glide slowly inside to enjoy the warmth there.

The following week they caught a pilot black snake, a glistening black monster six feet long. They discovered him draped along the lower branch of a pine tree; alongside him was a robin's nest—his successful goal, doubtless, for it was empty when the boys looked in it. Willie leaped and grabbed the limb tip and pulled limb and snake down within Tom's reach. Tom got the pilot by the tail just as it started off. A tug of war followed with the snake the loser, jerked rudely from the twigs and needles. But

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the reptile was not nearly yet ready to give in. He sunk his little ripping fangs in Tom's arm and made a long, shallow, serrated gash. Willie came to the rescue, only to be bitten similarly and even more severely; then Tom got the wild thing by the neck, and, save for a convulsive voiding of the musk sacs and the cloaca, its counteroffensive was done. They forced the big, writhing black fellow into their flour sack and tied the mouth of it and let him loop harmlessly inside it on the ground. Then they examined their wounds. It was the first time either had been snake-bitten, except for the insignificant nips of the garter snake, and they were highly nervous.

"He ain't poison, 'cause Doc Ditmars says he ain't," said Willie. "But he sure knows how to bite. Look at my arm bleed."

"Shoot, look at mine!" said Tom. "It's bleeding as much as yours and it hurts, too."

"Well, wrap yer handkerchief around it. It'll quit in a minute. Gosh, he's the biggest snake I ever did see!"

"Yeh, he's swell," agreed Tom. "But, come

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on, let's beat it home and see if we can sneak some iodine outta the closet 'fore mamma sees us."

"Aw, now, we ain't been poisoned."

"I know it, but we better put some stuff on, anyhow. Come on, let's go."

So they went home, put the pilot black snake in a box in the woodshed, and, unbeknown to their mother, doctored their arms with iodine, letting their shirt sleeves down to cover the stains. As a matter of fact, the snake's bites had healed during the walk home; after the boys washed off the clotted blood around them, there was nothing to be seen except what appeared to be a series of tiny scratches.

In a very short time, the pilot black snake became as tame as the Say's king snake. It never repeated its original fierce attack, and it grew finally to seem to enjoy being picked up and stroked. It delighted the boys with its excellent appetite and amazed them with the ease with which it swallowed a hen's egg or a half dozen of them. It simply spread its mouth around the egg and engulfed it, the egg going down, down,



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down, as an orange goes down the neck of an ostrich.

Eggs, however, were not too easily come by, the boys' only access to them being the ice box on the Farrier back porch. And there it was difficult to take one for fear their mother might have counted the total previously and wonder, upon a second counting, what had happened to the missing one. So at length the day came when the pilot had gone unfed for three weeks, due to its masters' apprehension over pilfering more eggs. Feeding the Say's king snake was not such a problem; all they had to do was catch lizards for him, and lizards were plentiful.

So they decided to take steps and see if they couldn't get their pilot a live rat. Not only would a rat make a good meal, but a big rat would test their snake's power of constriction, a power which both boys were convinced was quite enormous.

Norway rats were common enough in the barns and sheds of the neighborhood, Tar Beach's chicken houses being particularly favored by them on account of the supply of

PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT chicken feed Tar always kept on hand. The boys talked it over and concluded Tar might take it as a personal favor if they asked him to be allowed to trap some of his rats, and they went down one day to find out.

Curiously enough, when they reached his back fence, who should step out the gate but Tar himself. In one hand he carried a bucket of water, in the other a large wire rat trap. In the trap a big, ugly Norway rat leaped about. Obviously, Tar was preparing to drown his catch.

"Gosh, Mister Beach," said Willie in surprise and delight, "whur'd you get that swell big rat?"

"Well, sir, I caught him in this here trap, boy. Whur'd yuh think I'd git him—buy him at the dime store?"

"Gee! What'll yuh take for him?"

"Take fer him? What d'yuh mean—take fer him? You wanta buy him?"

"Well . . . gosh, Mister Beach, if yer just going to drown him, would you just as soon let us have him instead? We just come down to ask

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yuh if you'd mind if we'd catch some of yer  
rats, anyway."

"Well, now, what do you fool kids want with  
a durned ole rat? Seems like you git in enough  
trouble right along 'thout messing around with  
rats."

Willie excitedly and thoughtlessly said, "Aw,  
we wanta feed him to our snake, Mister Beach."  
He said it with much pride.

"Snake!" said Tar Beach with a sort of gasp.  
"Whur'd you git a snake?"

Willie wished he had bitten off his tongue.  
He mumbled, "Aw . . . we caught it."

"Where's it at?"

"Over home."

"Well, what in the name of the devil are yuh  
doin' with a snake, anyway?"

"Aw, we got him for a pet."

"Does yer maw know yuh got a snake?"

"Well . . . she kinda knows."

"What d'yuh mean—kinda knows?"

"Aw, shoot, she knows we all time got things  
for pets. Heck, she don't care as long as we  
don't bother nobody."

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Tar Beach suddenly felt an overwhelming duty as a member of the neighborhood. "You boys show me this here snake right away," he said very firmly. "By gum, it jest ain't safe to have snakes around nowhur. This here thing has gone plenty fur enough. If yer own mother cain't control yuh, by golly, it's high time someone else took a hand. Come on, show me yer snake. 'I God, I don't aim tuh let this go no further."

The boys inwardly raged at the idea of Tar Beach taking a hand in their lives but, there being nothing at the moment they could think of to do about it, they led him back to their woodshed. They walked before him silent and sullen; he followed, rat and rat trap in one hand, bucket full of water in the other. He, however, was anything but silent.

"'I God," he kept saying, "I don't fer the life of me see why you kids cain't settle down an' git yerselves jobs an' try an' be a help to yer mother 'stead of all time chasing out in the bresh an' catchin' critturs what makes more trouble fer her. Now, I 'member that doggone duck what

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you boys had. Why, I 'member it jest as plain as if 'twas yestiddy. An' nen them doggone crazy turtles what got Miss Kathy Oldwage so down on y'all. An', seems tuh me, I hearn tell uh yuh robbin' birds' nests so much that the humane society got after yuh. 'I God, I never see sech kids as you two! An' now a snake! It do beat all. Yessir, it do beat all."

The boys said nothing. They led him to the woodshed, opened the door, and let Tar in.

"Here's one of 'em," said Willie abruptly. He reached into a box and pulled out the Say's king snake.

"Name uh Gawd!" Tar backed away smartly. "Put that thing away quick 'fore it stings yuh an' kills yuh! Don't yuh know it's deadly pi-son? It's a copperhead if I ever seen one!"

"Aw, it ain't neither," said Willie. "It's a Say's king snake, and it ain't poison at all. Heck, it's so tame it ain't ever tried to bite even once. Here, feel how slick he is." He thrust the reptile towards Tar.

"Git away with thet gawdam thing, boy! Put him back in that box, quick!"

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"Why, my gosh, Mister Beach," said the surprised Tom, "it won't hurt you. It's just as tame as anything. Look—here's the other one—the one we wanta feed the rat to." And Tom lifted the lid from another box and pulled out six feet of glittering pilot black snake which promptly looped about his neck and wagged a long forked tongue at Tar.

Tar dropped rat trap and water bucket and attained the door in one startling backward bound.

"'I God," he proclaimed, "I never seen nothin' like it! Do you boys charm them there reptyles er what? Now, don't come no closer with 'em. I don't like 'em."

"Heck no, we don't charm 'em," said Willie scornfully, for he sensed that he and Tom now somehow held the upper hand. "We just ain't scared of 'em—any more'n y'er scared of yer old chickens. We understand 'em and they don't hurt us. That black one Tom has," he added, "is the one we wanta feed yer rat to."

The evident passivity on the part of the two snakes helped somewhat to allay Tar's fears. He

PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT looked at the pilot black snake intently. "Yuh reckon he'll eat it?" he asked.

"Sure," said Willie. "He ain't had nothing to eat for a long time; he ought to be good and hungry. We'll put him in that barrel and dump the rat in after him; that is, if you'll let us have the rat."

"Well," said Tar, "tell yuh what. Put that other doggone snake away fust. I don't wanta hafta be a-watchin' more'n one of 'em at a time."

So Willie put the king snake back in its box and set the barrel up on end. Tom slid the pilot black snake into the barrel. Dubiously, Tar handed the rat trap to Willie and stood back as far as he could and still see what happened.

Willie unlatched the door at the trap's end and, after a number of violent shakes, succeeded in dumping the rat down in the barrel with the snake. The serpent drew together in alarm, flicking its tongue, and buzzing like a rattler with its tail tip against the barrel bottom. The rat went into a series of jumps, trying

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wildly to leap out of the barrel. By doing so, it focused the snake's attention on itself.

The pilot black snake struck so swiftly that Tar Beach didn't even know what had happened. It caught the big Norway rat by the nose and the underjaw and, at the same instant and seemingly with the same motion, flung a series of eye-dazzling coils about it. The rat, held by the head and enwrapped in a strait-jacket of black snake, could only twitch one hind foot, and that very feebly. The serpent's loops were far from symmetrical and in no degree like the even loops of a rope around the drum of a windlass; instead they were all knotted and haphazard, none of them completely encircling the rodent. But they were so applied as to exert tremendous and increasing pressure, and the rat had the life squeezed out of it, probably before it knew what was happening.

And yet, even before death came, the gleaming, plated jaws began their swallowing. The little teeth began to chew, dragging the rat's head down into the snake's maw. The jaws spread wider and wider; the throat became



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“ ‘I God,” said Tar Beach, “look at his eyes bug out! I never seen nothin’ like it. I shorely never did.”

Neither had the Farrier boys. The snake’s unexpected ferocity of attack dazed them; he had always seemed gentle, even almost ladylike, in his eating of hen’s eggs. But the hideous speed with which he killed the rat and the remorselessness with which he engulfed it unnerved them. For a number of minutes they were afraid to reach in the barrel and take him out.

“ ‘I God,” said Tar Beach, “that thing ain’t safe to have around, boys. I wouldn’t trust it a-tall. Not never. I’m gonna tell yer maw about it right now. Fer she shore oughtta know what you kids got in this woodshed.”

Something of his unaffected perturbation conveyed itself to them; they began to wonder if they were harboring things inimical to the neighborhood and to their fellows—foul things

PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT in their own woodshed. However, despite the doubt now suddenly raised in their minds, they did consider that nothing would be gained by Tar's telling their mother, and they both protested against his loudly-announced project.

But it was no use. "'Tain't gittin' yuh no-whur a-tall tuh argue with me," said Tar. "Yer maw's gotta know 'bout them reptyles right now." And Tar picked up the empty rat trap and the water bucket and marched determinedly to the Farrier backdoor.

Mrs. Farrier stopped whatever she was doing and answered his summons. She saw him standing there, rat trap in one hand, water bucket in the other, a queer look in his eyes, and her two sons some distance behind him in definitely defiant attitudes. There was, she told herself, something of an unpleasant nature afoot.

However, all she said was, "Why, hello, Mister Beach! How are you today?" But even as she said it, she looked distrustfully at her sons.

"Well, I'm fine an' dandy, thank yuh, Miz Farrier," said Tar, "but I got the unfort'nate

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duty uh tellin' yuh somethin' 'bout yer boys  
here what I don't think yer gonna like."

Mrs. Farrier was very, very weary of the neighbors telling her things about her sons which the neighbors were sure she would not like, but she managed once again to hold her resentment in check, and she only said quietly, "Yes, Mister Beach? What is it now?"

"Why, uh, well, it's like this, Miz Farrier. They got 'em a passel uh snakes out thar in the woodshed, an' I don't think it's safe tuh have snakes aroun' whur they kin git loose an' bite folks an' all. Honest, Miz Farrier, I dunno whether I kin sleep nights no more now er not, now that I know yer kids got them doggone things here. Why, there ain't no tellin' what might happen."

Snakes, thought Mrs. Farrier. At last she understood why the boys had kept the Ditmars book so long from the library. She had glanced at it once or twice and seen nothing but pictures of snakes. Willie and Tom had devoured it, page by page, paragraph by paragraph. And now they had their own snakes. As a drowning

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man is supposed to newsreel in his brain the high spots of his life just before dying, so did Mrs. Farrier flash through her mind the pets of her sons. Beetles. Tadpoles. Frogs. Muscovy drake. Turtles. Screech owls. 'Possums. And now—snakes.

"Thank you for telling me, Mister Beach," she said. "I quite agree with you. I shall see that they get rid of them at once."

"Well, I figgered you should oughtta know," said Tar. And he frowned triumphantly at the boys and went off with his rat trap and bucket.

Mrs. Farrier sat down on the steps. "How many snakes have you got, Willie?" she asked.

"We ain't got but two, mamma. We had three, but one of 'em ate the other two. That is, he ate one of 'em, and just kinda killed the other."

"But that only leaves one," she said.

"Yeh," said Tom, "but we caught another, so now we got two."

"What kind of snakes are they?"

"One of 'em's a pilot black snake, mamma, and the other's a Say's king snake."

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"Are they poisonous?"

"Oh, gosh, no! They're real gentle. You wanta see 'em, mamma?"

"Not particularly," said Mrs. Farrier. "But I suppose I better."

They trotted to the woodshed and returned with their snakes. The pilot black snake rode in a long graceful loop about Tom's neck; the king snake coiled about Willie's arm.

Mrs. Farrier wondered at her sons—at the matter-of-fact calmness and assurance they displayed with these lithe reptiles, the very thought of which had promised to disturb the sleep of a grown man like Tar Beach. She had never been close to a snake before. She had never given snakes any thought before, except faint thoughts that idly and passingly pictured them as slimy, hideous things not worthy of any particular notice and, in any event, things not to be dwelled upon in the imagination.

And now she astonished herself by reaching with one hand and touching the pilot black snake with a fingertip, rubbing him a little. Why she did it she did not know. Tom held its

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throat lightly in one hand; his other supported the long tapering tail which hung far down from his shoulder.

She touched the cool, keeled scales with one fingertip and rubbed gently the curious muscular firmness. She looked at the snow-white throat, so startling in contrast to the blue-black head. She looked at the bluish bars bizarrely crossing the wide crawling-plates of its stomach.

"How beautiful it is!" she said without thinking. Then she uttered a little "Oh!" as the snake flickered out and in its purple tongue. And she drew away quickly.

"Aw, it's all right, mamma," Tom assured her. "He all time does that, but he don't mean nothing by it. Rub him some more; he likes it."

Mrs. Farrier touched the snake again. "What makes it so fat in this one spot?" she asked.

"Aw, that's that rat of Tar Beach's that it just got through eating," Tom explained.

Shattered immediately was the queer spell of charm the snake had begun to work upon her. Willie further shattered it by thrusting forward the Say's king snake with the announcement,

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"Yeh, and this is the one that ate one of the other snakes we had, but it was just an old garter snake and wasn't any good, anyhow."

Mrs. Farrier stood up. "They're nice," she said. "But you'll have to get rid of them."

Came the outraged answer inevitable: "Aw, gee, mamma, why? Heck, they don't hurt nothing!"

For once in her life Mrs. Farrier was spared from thinking up long, hasty, ill-considered arguments to attempt to sway her sons. For Miss Kathy Oldwage opened the gate between her yard and the Farriers' and came in saying, "'Lo, Miz Farrier! I do declare I'm jest fresh outta sugar an' I been wondering if maybe you could lemme have a cup er two."

Then Miss Kathy saw the snakes.

She executed a to-the-rear march that would have flattered a member of a crack drill team. In one and the same movement, she left the Farrier yard, attained her own yard, and slammed the gate. That done, she became vocal in a hysterical and gibbering sort of way. She tottered gibbering into her own house; even in the Far-

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rier back yard, they could hear her gibbers as she slammed the door and clicked the bolts.

"There," said Mrs. Farrier to her sons, "is the answer to your question. Now, you take those snakes out in the country and get rid of them; and, on the way back, you can both pray that you still have a house to live in."

And Helen Farrier passed a hand over her brow pathetically, left her kitchen steps, and went over to see Miss Kathy and attempt to avert what she feared would probably be the worst.

Of all times, she thought, this was the most distressful for a thing of the sort to happen. Her financial management had that month gone awry: the grocery bill was unpaid; the light bill was overdue; she had been on the point of telling Miss Kathy she would have to let the rent lapse for at least another month. And now what to tell her?

As for Tom and Willie, they recalled immediately and with great horror Miss Kathy's reactions and ultimatums when she had seen their snapping turtles. And they knew of the



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Farrier financial crisis and regretted the situation as much as their mother did.

They did what they could: silently and hurriedly they took two flour sacks, put the pilot black snake in one, Say's king snake in the other, and began a forlorn and tremulous journey.

They sneaked down the alley and across the vacant lot where they had caught the screech owls. They crossed the MK&T railroad spur and entered the Brushy Creek country. They came to a long, low hill where a hedge grew and where there was no farmhouse for a mile. There they freed the snakes. The pilot black snake slid up into the hedge and lay on a thorny branch. The Say's king snake slipped into the matted weeds. The boys went home.

"Well," said their mother in answer to their mute, uncertain looks, "things are in a lovely mess. Miss Kathy had to have a doctor. She says we have to move out in twenty-four hours."

"Well, my gosh, mamma, we turned the dog-

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gone snakes loose 'way out in the country; she ain't got nothing to squawk about now."

"Oh, she hasn't, hasn't she? Well, that's very encouraging, only you don't know Miss Kathy. She's raving. She says ever since we moved here it's been just one horrible thing after another and that she's never had a moment's peace as long as we've been her tenants, and won't have till we go. She's right, too. You both know she's right."

The boys had nothing to say. Finally Willie whimpered, "But, gosh, mamma, what we gonna do?"

"I'm sure I don't know. Misses Barsdel is coming over in a few minutes; she's going in with me to see Miss Kathy again. Misses Barsdel has agreed to let me have the rent money, and she's going to try to coax Miss Kathy into letting us stay."

The boys, themselves bitterly downcast, had never seen their mother in such a defeated mood. The heinousness of their crime rose in gigantic form in their minds; all that afternoon they were prey to fear.

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But at evening peace of a sort fell. The rent money and Mrs. Barsdel's influence had swayed Miss Kathy. She had withdrawn her ultimatum; the Farriers could stay on—but only on one unalterable condition: no more pets.

Mrs. Barsdel said, "Now, Willie, you and Tom simply have got to understand once and fer all that you can't bring no more animals home. Yer mother's lying down for a few minutes, and she asked me to talk to you. I don't aim to bawl you out or anything, but I will tell you this, that it was a mighty close call with them dernfool snakes, and Miss Kathy ain't going to stand fer nothing else."

"Oh, gee," said the relieved boys, "we won't never bring nothing home again. Mamma ain't sick, is she?"

"No. She's just all tired out—and no wonder. That crazy Kathy Oldwage is enough to drive a person to drink. Come on in the kitchen; I'll fix you boys a sandwich to eat."

For a dreary month thereafter there was diffidence in the Farrier household, and there was

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no mention ever of pets or animals. The boys puttered listlessly in the back yard or, in profound boredom, played shinny and baseball with the other boys of the neighborhood. But the delight of living had gone out of their summer. Even the Ditmars reptile book bore an evil connotation for them; it had heavy responsibility for their erring ways. For weeks in a row they were uncomfortable and miserable boys.

And finally it got on their mother's nerves; she could bear their dolefulness no longer.

"For heaven's sake, why don't you go out in the country again like you used to and have some fun for a change? Goodness, here you are stewing around all the time like two old men!"

"Aw," said Willie, self-righteously flagellating himself for the hundredth time, "I don't think we really care to go out no more, mamma. It ain't no fun any more. 'Sides, we always seem to get in trouble. We'll just keep on hanging around home where we don't bother people. School'll be open pretty soon, anyway."

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"Piffle!" said Mrs. Farrier. "You can't fool me, Willie. I'm going to make you some sandwiches, and you can go out this very day. Why don't you go to Brushy Creek? You always used to go there a lot."

"Aw, it ain't really no fun out there, mamma."

But Mrs. Farrier went ahead and made sandwiches and found herself in the peculiar position of ordering her sons to go out into the wilds instead of, as had been her former role, suggesting they stay home for a change.

The boys gloomily obeyed her, each enjoying to the utmost the character of martyr. Slowly they walked out to the formerly loved country that stretched endless beyond the end of the pavement. They kept silent at first; then they began to take morose delight in belittling the vales where in their yesterdays they had found ecstasy.

"Nasty little old stinking sewer creek," they said as they passed Jackson's Branch.

"Crazy old mudhole," they sneered at Frogpond.

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Along the banks of Brushy they found a box tortoise. "Doggone old dumb turtle," they sniffed and kicked him in the water.

They hurled rocks at bluejays and cardinals. They struck at wild flowers with their sticks.

After a while they sat down on the creek bank to eat their sandwiches. They were still deep in their mood of bitter disillusion with Nature; a mood that sprang, of course, from love. They had sat on the bank perhaps ten minutes, chewing their sandwiches, when, across a gravel bar below them at the water's edge, there came a snake.

It came in a straight line, sliding along on its belly slowly, as if it were walking on a hundred hidden subtle feet. It did not wriggle or zigzag as had all the other snakes they ever observed; it came straight, as a stick moved endwise. It was a snake about three feet long, and its color was a velvety sulphur yellow broken symmetrically by sooty-black rhomboidal saddles down its back. It was fat in the middle and slender in the throat; its head was shaped like the ace of spades. It was a spectacularly beautiful timber

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rattlesnake; twelve horny segments complemented its tail.

The Farrier boys sat very still, for a long moment unable to believe that they were looking at the apogee of the reptiles of the Missouri farmlands. Nothing they had ever seen alive was nearly as beautiful. Nothing they had ever dreamed of was nearly as deadly looking. The rattler slid over the gravel bar, his castanets quiet, his head low. Then Tom made a sudden, unconscious move. The rattler flung itself into an S-shaped, rearing coil; the castanets shrilled out their deathsong.

For the first time in their lives the Farrier boys were confronted by something which evoked in them a supreme and unquestioned fear. The rattler's head, delicately balancing, swayed back and forth, back and forth; the wicked tongue flicked constantly; the rattles sang and sang. The plump, beautiful body shifted steadily in its coils. Imperceptibly almost, the snake was now moving sideways across the gravel bar, but its head always faced the boys—the enemy.

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"We gotta kill him," whispered Willie.

"Yeh, we gotta kill him," echoed Tom.

It was the first time they had ever deliberately killed anything. They were both afraid. They killed the rattler by breaking its back with a stone, then smashing its head with a club. Rattlers are the easiest of all snakes to kill, for they make no real attempt to get away unless refuge is immediately at hand. Magnificent fatalists, they accept the gauntlet and fight back. Apparently they never think of asking quarter; they intend only to kill or be killed.

The Farriers killed their rattler in a sort of awkward, fearful frenzy. It was as if he symbolized for them the source of their trouble and unhappiness. But after he was well dead a counter-revulsion came upon them quickly; they wished they had not done it. They began to feel they had done something irreparable. This was the first rattler they had ever seen; all they had been able to do was slaughter him clumsily and violently in a fever of fear.

As a forlorn trophy, they skinned the snake



PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT and took home his hide and rattles. They looked with shame at the flayed body they left on the gravel bar. It twitched in the sunlight as they left, a white, dead, headless muscle that still retained the semblance of life.

And yet, somehow, the killing of that beautiful timber rattlesnake wrested them out of their doldrums. Almost daily thereafter they returned to the hills and streams. They seemed to feel they somehow ought to make amends to Nature for what they had done to her golden child, and they visited her constantly.

The great opportunity came one middle-August morning when they were skirting along the edge of a harvested field that bordered Flat Creek. They heard a loud hallooming from the field and saw a farmer boy there with a team of horses, calling to them. His excited yelling was unintelligible, but it was obvious he wanted help, so they went over to him across the stubble.

"C'mere!" he cried as they approached. "C'mere! They's a gawdam snake here ten foot

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long, but I cain't leggo uh this here team long enough to git me a club!"

The boys broke into a run at that announcement, and, when they reached the farmer boy and his team, a very queer sight confronted them.

In the dusty lane ahead of boy and team, a big, dark snake was coiling and writhing and hissing. Its spread-out head was as wide as Willie Farrier's hand, and its infuriated hissings were louder than an eagle's. Repeatedly it struck with a vast ferocity—sometimes in one direction, sometimes in another. Never once did it cease its convulsive writhings. It was a wicked and frantic-looking thing. But the odd part about its great performance was that there was no necessity for any of it; no one was or had been bothering the snake; it could very easily have slunk off into the wheat stubble.

"Gee, what is it?" asked Tom.

"Oh, Gawd, fellah, it's a puff adder!" said the farmer boy. "It's a black puff adder. Jeess, look how big he is! I ain't never seen a snake that big before! You fellahs take yer sticks an'

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beat his head in! But be mighty keerful! He's  
pison as all hell."

Willie took a grip on his self-control and remembered Ditmars. "Puff adder" was just another name for hognose snake; and a hognose snake, according to Ditmars, was the biggest and most harmless bluff in the reptile kingdom. However, it did seem incredible that this terrifying thing in the dusty lane was merely bluffing; the vehemence of its hisses seemed to indicate a wholesome amount of sincerity.

So Willie approached the snake cautiously and attempted to pin down its head with his stick. For a moment the reptile thrashed about and hissed even more loudly; then, very surprisingly, it flipped itself over on its back and lay quiet.

"My Gawd," said the startled farmer boy, "hev yuh kilt it awready?"

Willie was doubtful. "Gosh, I don't think so. I don't see how I could. I didn't hardly even touch it."

He poked the snake gently with his stick. There was no response. It lay in a curlicue on

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its back, its buff-colored abdomen to the sun, unmoving and unresponsive.

"It shore looks dead," said the farmer boy, maintaining a safe distance. "Mebbe them puff adders kills real easy-like."

Tom experimented by picking the snake up. It hung from his grasp as limp as a rope. He laid it down in the road, right side up this time. At once the snake flipped itself over on its back as it had been before.

"Why, the crazy thing's doing it on purpose!" he cried. "It's playing dead—just like a 'possum or something. Here, watch!" And he righted it once more, only to have the snake immediately turn over again.

"I believe it's sick," said the farmer boy. "Anyhow, if it ain't ackshully dead yet, whyn't yuh go ahead an' rilly kill it now that yuh got a good chanct?"

"Kill it nothing!" said Willie. "What the heck you wanta kill it for? It's perfectly harmless. Look at the crazy thing; it couldn't hurt nobody."

" 'I God, you jest think it's harmless," sniffed

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the farmer boy. "You evidently don't know nothin' a-tall 'bout snakes. Yer city kids, ain'tcha? I'm tellin' yuh them gawdam puff adders is the most pison snakes there is. Hold this here team; I'll kill the sapsucker fer yuh if yuh'll loan me yer stick."

"No, you ain't going to kill him!" said Willie determinedly. "It ain't right to kill harmless snakes. I guess it's all right to kill rattlesnakes, but it ain't all right to kill hognose snakes. Here, Tom, gimme the sack. We'll take him home."

"Why, yuh gawdam crazy fools," stormed the farmer boy, "that thing'll pison both of yuh!"

"Aw, it won't either," said Tom. "We know all about snakes, and we know what kinds are dangerous and what ain't." And the Farrier boys sacked up the black hognose snake and went off across the wheatfield.

When they got to the road, they paused to reconsider.

Tom said, "Mamma'd just about go crazy if we was to bring home another snake."

Willie said, "Gosh, I know it! But if we turn

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this one loose, somebody'll kill him in less'n an hour. He's such a crazy thing that he ain't got sense enough to go off and hide."

They dumped him out of the flour sack to have another look at him. He hissed loudly just once, then flipped over on his back in an attitude of abject moribundity. When they picked him up by the middle, he felt as lifeless as an empty inner tube.

They looked at his head. He had a sharply accentuated, abruptly upturning snout, almost exactly like the snout of a hog. He had a great, wide mouth, the edges of which curled in a perpetual smile. He was as black as pitch on top, and his scales were shiny and keeled; underneath he was as buff as Hohokam pottery. He was a fat fellow, more than four feet long—a giant of his kind.

Even as they examined him he decided death-playing was achieving him no results; he came to with alacrity, raised his head, and looked at them, grinning from ear to ear.

"Golly!" said Tom. "Didja ever see such a snake? Why, he looks just like Benji Summers."

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Benji Summers was a boy who went to the same school the Farriers attended. Like the black hognose snake, he, too, had a fat head, up-turned snout, and perpetual grin.

"We just can't turn him loose," decided Willie. "Doggone old Miss Kathy, anyhow! Why don't she die or something?"

"Maybe," said Tom, who didn't want to part with Benji any more than did Willie, "we can put him in the woodshed real quiet and not ever tell nobody about it. We wouldn't of had any trouble as it was if you hadn't of told Tar Beach about them other snakes."

"Well, I'll never tell nobody about this here snake," vowed Willie. "I learnt my lesson. We'll go home by way of the alley and sneak him in. We'll put him in one box and hide it in another one where nobody'll ever look."

So they took Benji home and hid him securely in the woodshed; for several weeks, despite a guilty feeling about him, they were happy boys.

For Benji was a personable fellow and a fel-

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low with a definite personality. He ate garden toads with all the zest in the world. The boys fed him a toad every other morning, toads being easily come by, for they haunted the street corners at night where the arc lights attracted millions of bugs, and all the boys had to do was go to the nearest corner, pick up the first toad they saw, and put him in a can to await Benji's next meal.

Benji had a huge mouth and could swallow an unbelievably large toad. In fact, the Farriers never succeeded in finding a toad so big that Benji couldn't swallow it. Benji, too, was even more eager to eat than had been the garter snake. All the boys needed to do was remove the cover from Benji's box, show Benji a toad, and Benji would come sliding out, his tongue flickering, and joy in his eyes. Benji would follow them around the woodshed as long as they dangled a toad in front of him. Once they tried to trick him by tempting him with a rubber toad purchased at the ten-cent store, but Benji was too smart. He wiggled his tongue at the fraudulent batrachian, recognized it for what



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it was, and refused to leave his box till the Farriers fetched him something more authentic.

Again and again the boys regretted the circumstances which kept them from telling their mother of Benji and exhibiting him to her. For they felt she might like Benji and be amused by him; they felt that Benji might, in a way, demonstrate to her what they had been looking for for so long. Indeed, their silence during meals when one or the other abruptly choked back words, the beginnings of which were in forgetful, gleeful acknowledgment of one of Benji's current exploits, should have indicated to her that something was amiss; and it would probably have done so had she not been far too worried about another matter to note her-sons' behavior.

The matter, of course, was money, and the money was for the light bill. The bill had not been paid for two months, and the meter had been disconnected. That disconnection ended the lights but not the worry.

She told the boys about it as casually as she could. "We'll just have to get along with candles

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for a while. If anyone comes over and I say a fuse is burned out, don't either of you give me away. I just know that next month I can get caught up, and then everything will be all right. What makes me so mad, though, is that the silly bill is only for ten dollars. I should think the light company could give me a little more grace, because I've been paying the bill faithfully for years, but there's no convincing Kenneth Kimes of that."

Her sons assured her of their support and co-operation and threw in a bit of philosophy, too. "Well, heck, mamma, we don't really need the doggone lights now, anyhow, for we don't hafta study yet or nothing. Candles are just as good, anyway."

And the Farrier household did get along quite well for a while with candles as the only illumination. There came a day, however, which saw two great occurrences: the state fair opened; the bishop of the diocese came to town on his annual visit.

It had been a long-established custom with

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Helen Farrier always to have the bishop over for dinner at least one night of the yearly visit. As a minister he had presided at her wedding and had baptized her two sons; as a bishop he had confirmed them.

It had been a long-established custom with Tom and Willie always to sneak into the fairgrounds on opening day and see the exhibits for nothing. The custom had been established when they found a hidden hole under the fairgrounds fence years before that never was repaired.

And so, at approximately the time Mrs. Farrier was greeting the bishop and inviting him to dinner for the following evening, her sons were crawling through their secret entrance and gaining unpaid entry to the Missouri State Fair.

They walked around warily at first till they felt sure no one had seen their illegal entrance; then they began to look at things. Almost at once they were attracted by the State Game and Fish Exhibit; it was the first time Missouri had ever had one with her fair.

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With delight and wonderment they saw their first deer—a slim, tame red doe with a tiny, delicate, spotted fawn. They saw a gray fox, timid and shrinking and smelly—completely unlike the conception they had evoked of foxes after reading tales of Sir Reynard and his wiliness. They saw a badger; he clowned in his pen and was even more smelly than the fox. They felt repelled by the dung so evident in all the animal pens; the animals they had seen in the wild were all so clean and free and detached from such homely realities.

A great quantity of fish were in the glass tanks: bass, perch, trout, carp, fat and heavy, and catfish with scarified snouts from too much prodding at the glass sides. The fish swam endlessly and restlessly; they, too, had their own peculiar smells.

Then, wonder of wonders, Tom and Willie came upon the exhibit of snakes—real, live snakes in tight boxes with glass fronts. The exhibit was there through the courtesy of the St. Louis Zoo.

The Farriers saw rattlers so big that the

PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT timber rattler they had killed seemed a fishing worm by comparison. They saw king snakes from the southwest so colorful that their own Say's king snake seemed faded and drab. They saw an indigo snake so huge they doubted he could be real. They saw cottonmouth moccasins and copperheads and bull snakes and chicken snakes and a magnificent fer de lance from South America. Then, lo and behold, just at the moment they were beginning to feel overwhelmed by all the reptilian grandeur, they saw in a little box by itself a common hognose snake, a gray-and-spotted one about eighteen inches long.

And they looked at each other in high triumph, and they said very scornfully, "Shucks, Benji would make ten or twelve of that durned little thing! 'Sides, Benji's black. They may have big old rattlesnakes in this place, but they ain't got nothing like Benji."

The curator of the reptiles saw the two boys and marked their very serious interest and sauntered over to them.

"You boys like snakes?" he asked.

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"Kinda," said Willie suspiciously.

"Ever catch any?"

"We caught some," said Tom bravely.

"Did you? What kind?"

"We got a pilot black snake and a Say's king snake and a brown water snake and a common garter snake—but we had to get rid of 'em 'cause the neighbors complained," Willie told him.

"Same trouble I used to have," smiled the curator. "How come you know the names of 'em so well?"

"Aw, we read Ditmars's *Reptile Book*," said Willie, still on guard, although the man seemed to be a reasonable person in talking about snakes.

"Did you? Well, that's fine. Doctor Ditmars is a great guy. He knows more about snakes than any man alive."

The ice of the Farriers' reserve completely melted at that; both of them began asking the curator question after question about the snakes on display, and he answered their queries intelligently and good-naturedly. And finally Tom asked, "How come you haven't got a black hog-

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nose snake, 'stead of just this little common  
one?"

"Well," said the curator, "it isn't every day  
you can find a black hognose snake. I've been  
hunting for one for six years, but I've never  
seen a single one yet—not even a shucked hide.  
People kill 'em as fast as they run across 'em,  
'cause they think they're poisonous, and I imag-  
ine they're nearly extinct, at least around here  
in Missouri."

"Would you like to have one?" asked Willie.

"Lord, yes! I'd give ten bucks for a good  
big one."

Tom twitched at Willie's arm and started to  
whisper loudly. But Willie had the same idea  
as had fired Tom, and he spoke up aloud.  
"Would you give ten dollars for one that's a  
little bit over four feet long?"

"They don't get near that long, kid, but if  
they did I'd sure give it. Now, don't tell me  
you got one."

"Yessir, we have. Honest. I know he's four  
feet long at least, 'cause we kinda measured  
him, only we couldn't get him all the way

PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT stretched out. Would you really buy him?"

"Did you beat him good with a stick 'fore you caught him?"

"Heck, no, we didn't. Why, we just picked him up off the ground. He eats good and everything. There ain't nothing the matter with him at all. He just changed his skin yesterday."

"Well . . . I'll have to look at him first, boys. Ten dollars is a lot of dough."

"We can bring him out right away, mister."

"Well . . . let's see. Well . . . you go ahead and get him and let me look at him. But, remember now, I haven't promised anything."

"Yeh, sure, we remember! C'mon, Tom, let's go."

They ran all the way home from the fairgrounds. They put the surprised Benji in a flour sack and ran all the way back. They scurried through their hole in the fence so fast that Tom ripped half the shirt from his back.

But, arriving again at the fish and game exhibit, they found the curator lecturing to a group of middle-aged women. The Farriers'



PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT excitement abated abruptly; they stood shyly aside. The curator saw them, however, and he nodded friendlily to them, and ended his lecture quickly. Then, as the women drifted away, he beckoned them to him. "Let's see your snake," he grinned.

He whistled loudly as they dumped huge, placid Benji from the sack. "Good Lord!" he said. "He's magnificent! Makes that little baby of mine look like a tomato bug, doesn't he? No fooling, you boys really caught yourselves a snake when you got this guy."

He looked Benji over very carefully. "I don't see anything wrong with him," he said finally. "Not even a scale loose. The deal's still on, if ten bucks is still your price."

"Oh, sure!" said Willie. "We don't really wanta sell him, but we got to, for if the neighbors ever found out about him we'd hafta move or something."

The curator took out his billfold and gave each of the boys a five-dollar bill. "Don't pick up any copperheads thinking they're yellow-bellied king snakes," he grinned at them. "And

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if you ever come up to St. Louis, drop around at the reptile house and see me. This baby'll be there to say hello to you. In the meantime, if you catch any twelve-foot garter snakes, why, wire me collect."

"Yessir, we sure will," said the boys.

They went home much more slowly than they had gone, but they went home puffed with triumph. Benji was off their consciences for good, and, in doing right by Benji, they felt somehow they had evened their score with Nature. For, out in the wheatfield, they had saved Benji from death, they had cared for him and kept him happy for several weeks, and now he was assured a splendid home where there would be a constant leaven of toads and where no one would bother him. Furthermore, they had ten dollars, which was more money than they had ever had before.

But, when they reached home in their triumph, they found their mother in a mood of sorrow charged with irritability.

"What's the matter, mamma?" they asked.

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"Oh, it's just something silly," she said, "but it makes me mad."

"Well, what is it, mamma? Maybe we kin help."

"It's nice of you to offer to, but I don't think there's anything you can do. You see, Bishop Franklin came to town today, and I invited him over for dinner tomorrow night. But I completely forgot about the lights being cut off, and now when the bishop sees the candles I suppose I'll have to tell him that silly fib again about the fuse being burnt out. Oh! If I just had the ten dollars to pay the light bill!"

In utter silence, her sons stared at each other. Then, bashfully, each took from his pocket a five-dollar bill and handed it to his mother.

"Here, mamma, we earned this today, but you take it and pay the doggone light bill."

"Heavens above!" said Helen Farrier, and looked as if she were on the verge of fainting.

"Aw, it ain't nothing, mamma," they hastily assured her. "We caught another snake, but we went and sold it to a guy at the fairgrounds. It ain't here any more, mamma. There don't any-

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body know we even had it 'cept the guy we sold it to, and he's gonna take it to St. Louis."

Next night the bishop arrived at seven. At seven-thirty, the bishop and the Farriers sat down to dinner. The electric lights burned with a benevolent brilliance; over all the meals he had ever presided, the bishop never said a finer grace. All through the meal the boys kept staring at him; his smile and his appetite reminded them of Benji.





















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